

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A DEEP JOY INSIDE IT: THE MUSICAL
AESTHETICS OF KEITH JARRETT

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Keith Jarrett is an American pianist whose music and aesthetics stand out as dynamic, polarizing forces not only in jazz, but within the entire contemporary American musical world. The breadth of Jarrett's musical activities, crossing jazz, classical, and even "world music" boundaries, is unprecedented, yet his name is rarely mentioned outside of jazz. Aside from one biography and a handful of dissertations, academic writing dealing with Jarrett is scant.

Jarrett's philosophical justifications for his music offer a rare example of a creative musician unafraid to grapple publicly with self-analysis. His aesthetics fall squarely within the lineage of American musical "individualists," and this thesis draws comparisons to Charles Ives and American Transcendentalism. Through an examination of Jarrett's writings and interviews, this thesis examines: 1) the nature of his aesthetics, 2) possible origins of these ideas, and 3) how Jarrett's music does or does not correspond with his stated philosophies.

A DEEP JOY INSIDE IT: THE MUSICAL AESTHETICS
OF KEITH JARRETT

By

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Chapter 1: Introductions/Justifications

Music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music, while the music lasts. – T.S. Eliot¹

Art should exhilarate, and throw down the walls of circumstance on every side, awakening in the beholder the same sense of universal relation and power which the work evinced in the artist, and its highest effect is to make new artists.
– Ralph Waldo Emerson²

Music should be thought of as the desire for an ecstatic relationship to life. Music has to have a deep joy inside it. – Keith Jarrett³

Introduction

Perhaps more than any other musician today, pianist Keith Jarrett practices and preaches an expansive and inherently American musical vision. Jarrett's music touches upon many issues relevant to the creation of contemporary music: the practice of improvisation, the inclusion of folk music in so-called "serious" music, the interconnected (if often stormy) relationship between American jazz and Euro-centric classical music, polemics of "technique vs. inspiration," and the burdens of tradition and influence. The case of Keith Jarrett provides a dynamic, complex and at times self-contradictory example of a modern American musician intensely grappling with issues of identity and the search for an individual musical voice.

¹ T.S. Eliot. "The Dry Salvages," from *Four Quartets* (Harvest Books, 1968), p.44.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays, First Series* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

³ Michael Walsh, "Growing Into the Silence," *Time*, 23 October 1995.

Simply put, no other modern American musician covers the amount of musical turf that Keith Jarrett does on such a thrilling, masterful level. His musical flexibility, coupled with his prolific output covering over forty years, is staggering – Jarrett is a tireless music-maker. His singular position as an active, historically significant, and highly respected member of both the classical and the jazz worlds makes him uniquely situated to offer commentary on the state of modern American “art” music. Very few examples exist of contemporary musicians who maintain credible careers in both fields, and Jarrett’s aesthetic perspectives are informed by his eclecticism. In the jazz world, it often seems that Jarrett relishes his role of elder statesman/aesthete, as he frequently offers pointed pronouncements and invectives critiquing both the jazz and “non-jazz” worlds. Though this phenomenon occurs more frequently with classical artists (especially composers), rarely does the jazz world offer the case of a vital musician like Jarrett offering up aesthetic “treatises” concurrent with his musical activities. Though his positions are contentious and controversial, Jarrett’s views have proven just as influential on young musicians as has his music. Whether or not one agrees with what Jarrett has to say, it is undeniable that his deep intellectual curiosity – a trait seeming to parallel the intensity of his musical explorations – deserves consideration. Keith Jarrett is a fascinating thinker and an important American musician, but surprisingly, there has been little discussion of him in academic circles.

Goals

This thesis examines the nature of Jarrett's aesthetic positions and possible origins of these ideas. To these ends, I will also briefly examine selected portions of Jarrett's oeuvre in order to illustrate the ways that Jarrett's art might (or might not) be taken to reflect his own aesthetic positions.

Sources

Having deliberately sequestered himself away in the rural environs of his one-hundred and thirty year old, western New Jersey farm home, Jarrett emerges from his hermitage to give interviews and offer commentary with irregular frequency. For an artist whose identity seems so colored with reclusiveness, however, Jarrett's penchant for making grand proclamations detailing what he sees as the ills of modern music does seem paradoxical. Yet this is the very type of embodied contradiction that makes Jarrett such an intriguing figure. Perhaps Jarrett's boldest and most representative written manifesto comes in the form of a 1992 *New York Times* article, entitled *Categories Aplenty, But Where's the Music?*⁴ This piece concisely distills a wide range of Jarrett's perspectives, and I will make frequent reference to it. Jarrett also gives interviews to journalists at the rate of about one every two years, often timed, perhaps not coincidentally, with the release of a new album, and material from these sources will be included. There are two recorded interviews with Jarrett publicly available, if difficult to track down. One book exists that deals exclusively with Jarrett and his music, a biography by the British journalist/musician Ian Carr,

⁴ Keith Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty, but Where's the Music?" *New York Times*, 16 August 1992, Sec. H, p. 19.

and this book, written with Jarrett's aid and consent, contains numerous statements coming directly from Jarrett. Musicologist Gernot Blume has written a dissertation on Jarrett (*Musical Practices and Identity Construction in the Work of Keith Jarrett*, University of Michigan, 1998), and I also draw from this. Lastly, I employ liner notes from Jarrett's own recordings; these are an excellent source because Jarrett most frequently lays out his ideas in this context. As my purpose here is not necessarily to study Keith Jarrett's music, but rather, to objectively examine his aesthetic perspectives and foundations, a large portion of this thesis will necessarily lean upon Jarrett's own writings and commentary. I should mention, however, that writing about Jarrett "objectively" seems an inherently difficult act, due to the way that Jarrett's convincing (and rather absolutist) rhetoric tends to color one's own perspectives.

Chapter 2: Jarrett's Importance in Modern Music

Stylistic breadth

What first comes to mind when considering Jarrett the musician is not only his remarkably prolific output, but perhaps more significantly, the sheer stylistic breadth that his recordings encompass. Since 1967, Jarrett has released 70 albums as a leader or soloist; he has also recorded in approximately 20 projects as sideman; by any measure, this is tremendous production. Jarrett's professional recording career spans almost 40 years, and historically, bridges gaps between 1960s post-Coltrane free jazz, 1970s jazz-rock, and postmodern improvisation. Stylistically, however, Jarrett's piano playing has incorporated elements from the entirety of jazz history. For instance, his recorded history has proven him just as likely to improvise a stomping, ragtime piece reminiscent of James P. Johnson as he is to offer tight, nimble bebop lines of the sort associated with pianist Bud Powell. Concerning Jarrett's playing during a 1968 run at Shelly's Manne Hole in LA, noted jazz critic Leonard Feather observed: "What came out was not much short of a complete history of jazz piano played backwards."⁵ What's more, Jarrett's recent improvisations often sound closer to 20th-century classical works than anything resembling traditional jazz. There are but a handful of living jazz musicians who have retained an inherently exploratory nature with such longevity and sustained productivity; Sonny Rollins, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea come to mind. None of these musicians, however, come close to touching Jarrett's stylistic flexibility, or penchant for controversy. For a

⁵ Liner notes to *Foundations: The Keith Jarrett Anthology*, Rhino Records, 1994.

number of reasons, including his insistence on the spiritual value of music making, his unrelenting experimentation, and his absolute dedication to the whims of his muse (often at the risk of alienating his own core audience), Keith Jarrett can conceivably be considered the symbolic heir to John Coltrane.

Importance/influence in jazz world

Since the death of Coltrane in 1967, jazz has changed immensely, and during this period of great upheaval, Keith Jarrett has stood as one of the music's leading figures. It is impossible to deny the important place Jarrett holds in the jazz world. Scanning media coverage of recent recordings by the Keith Jarrett Trio, one finds weighty phrases such as "Simply put, this is jazz at its best,"⁶ and "about as good as jazz gets... or has ever gotten"⁷ – indeed, the stature of this group has become so large that reviewers seem to run out of superlatives. *Time* classical reviewer Michael Walsh says of Jarrett: "his playing is marked by a clear, crystalline piano sound, a keen musical intelligence and a technique that can handle just about anything a composer throws at him – or he throws at himself."⁸ This reputation for greatness has been associated with Jarrett throughout his career. On the album notes for Jarrett's first professional recording, in 1962, with the college "all-star" band of educator/bandleader Don Jacoby, Jacoby states, "Keith Jarrett at sixteen is the youngest member of the ensemble. His versatility is interesting and typical. Accompanied by his mother, he auditioned for Berklee by brilliantly executing

⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, as quoted on CD promotional sticker.

⁷ Keith Jarrett, "Sons of Miles: Keith Jarrett, the Well-Tempered Jazz-Band," interview by Mike Zwerin, *Culture Kiosque*, 25 June 1998, accessed on 8 June 2004, available at <http://www.culturekiosque.com/jazz/miles/rhemile13.htm>

concerti by Brahms and Gershwin, and finishing with several of his original jazz compositions.”⁹ A *Melody Maker* review of Jarrett’s 1974 quartet album *Belonging* reads: “Keith Jarrett continues to dumbfound in his capacity as the most versatile jazz musician alive.”¹⁰ The release of a new Keith Jarrett album always generates excitement in jazz and even mainstream press – in addition to countless reviews in jazz periodicals, feature articles on Jarrett were published in major national publications (e.g., *The New York Times* and *Time*) upon the release of his 1999 album *The Melody at Night, With You*. Perhaps most striking is the following statistic – Jarrett’s 1975 recording *The Köln Concert*, the album that basically launched his solo career, has sold over *two million* copies, making it the best-selling solo piano album *of any genre*. For an artist whose music tends to be as relentlessly thorny and uncompromising as Jarrett’s, it is a wonder that he maintains this almost fanatical, rock-star like aura within American musical life. Jarrett plays the world’s most prestigious venues – Carnegie Hall, La Scala, the Vienna State Opera, and so forth – and these concerts consistently sell out. This type of public recognition is certainly unheard of for contemporary American jazz musicians, as well as for most historical jazz figures, with the possible exceptions of Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. Indeed, Jarrett’s status as a quasi-celebrity of American music contributes to his profound influence in modern jazz.

Jarrett is a major influence on young jazz musicians today; a woefully incomplete list of jazz pianists who have been influenced by Jarrett might include Brad Mehldau,

⁸ Walsh, “Growing Into the Silence.”

⁹ Liner notes to *Swinging Big Sound: Don Jacoby and the College All-Stars*, Decca Records, 1962.

Joachim Kühn, Geri Allen, Mulgrew Miller, Ted Rosenthal, Lyle Mays, Esbjorn Svensson, and the late Michel Petrucciani. Mehldau, perhaps the only widely recognized jazz talent to emerge in the past ten years, discusses his influences as a teenage student of jazz, “A friend of mine gave me Keith Jarrett's *Bremen and Lausanne*. ... it was kind of like, discovering that that was possible on the piano, what he was doing. I think I could relate to it, coming from the classical side of things.”¹¹

ECM aesthetic

Keith Jarrett’s musical aesthetics are intimately tied up with those of the influential German-based ECM label. Since the early 1970s, ECM has provided the jazz and classical worlds with a gold standard for musical introversion and depth coupled with famously pristine recording quality. Within the jazz community, ECM is enormously popular and well respected, even if it does occasionally draw fire for displaying what some consider a patently Euro-centric austerity at odds with the “roots” of jazz. In any case, ECM’s role seems to have outgrown the traditional boundaries of a mere record label. The “ECM aesthetic” has come to suggest a recognizable, reverential approach to music-making, and stylistically, it has probably influenced jazz as much as any other identifiable “movement” in the past 30 years.

Since his 1972 solo release *Facing You*, Jarrett has worked with legendary ECM producer Manfred Eicher, who has supervised the recording of close to fifty of Jarrett’s albums. This sort of long-standing, symbiotic relationship between record

¹⁰ ECM promotional insert to Jarrett’s 1977 album *Staircase*.

label, producer, and artist is unprecedented in jazz history, though Rudy Van Gelder's production work for the Blue Note label during the 1960s perhaps provides a precedent.¹² During his tenure at ECM, Jarrett has given the label an instantly recognizable musical identity, and to some degree has become a bankable "star," so rare in the jazz world. Additionally, Jarrett's ventures into classical music provided at least some of the impetus behind the ECM New Series, which since its incorporation in the mid 1970s has been a highly regarded forum for innovative classical recordings, focusing mainly on early music and new music.¹³ Not surprisingly, Jarrett's influence also shows up in ECM's current roster of musicians. On his 1997 album *Barzakh*, the Arabic *oud* player Anouar Brahem lists Jarrett as a primary influence. Popular Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek, a member of Jarrett's 1970s "European quartet," remains affected by Jarrett's aesthetics. Numerous pianists who have recently recorded for ECM, such as the Swedish Bobo Stenson, the Norwegian Tord Gustavsen, the Greek Vassilis Tsabropoulos and the Americans Marilyn Crispell and Michael Cain, are all influenced by Jarrett's piano style.

¹¹ Brad Mehldau, *A Conversation with Brad Mehldau*, interview with Fred Jung, *All About Jazz*, accessed 8 June 2004, available from <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/iviews/bmehldau.htm>

¹² Van Gelder's work for Blue Note, however, did not focus on, or come to be associated with, one specific artist to the extent that Eicher has with Jarrett's music.

¹³ ECM New Series boasts recordings of some of classical music's most highly respected artists and ensembles, including composers Arvo Pärt, Steve Reich, John Adams, Meredith Monk, and György Kurtág, pianists Robert Levin, Andras Schiff, and Peter Serkin, violist Kim Kashkashian, and the Hilliard Ensemble (arguably the preeminent vocal group in early music), who now record exclusively for ECM.

Influence in popular music

A further aspect of Jarrett's influence exists in the doors that his poly-stylistic approach has opened for musicians coming from the pop and rock worlds. The critical, popular, and artistic success of Jarrett's classical albums has encouraged numerous modern musicians to listen to (and be influenced by) a wide range of classical music. Renowned vocalist, bare-footed conductor and all-around creative savant Bobby McFerrin, whose free-wheeling aesthetics are profoundly influencing the presentation of contemporary classical music, claims that Jarrett's solo piano improvisations provided the initial inspiration for his own unaccompanied vocal work. The popular rock musician Dave Matthews once stated that Jarrett's *Köln Concert* contains some of his favorite music, and also claimed that "I'm inspired by piano players like Keith Jarrett and Abdullah Ibrahim. The melodies they play just thrill me because they jump a long way through different ranges."¹⁴ Perhaps most strikingly, infamous rocker and *Rolling Stones* lead singer Mick Jagger once named Jarrett as "the individual whom he most looks up to in music."¹⁵

¹⁴ Jeffrey Rotter, *hippyhippyshake*, *SPIN*, accessed on 8 June 2004, available from <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/6580/hippie.html>

¹⁵ Ian Carr. *Keith Jarrett: the Man and his Music*. (London: Da Capo Press, 1991), 134.

Chapter 3: Jarrett's Musical Flexibility

Musical tendencies

Jarrett's insistence on always heeding (and documenting) the inclinations of his muse has led him to record an incredibly diverse array of music. Jarrett has been involved in a plurality of musical contexts crossing boundaries between the jazz and classical worlds: stylistically wide-ranging group and solo improvisation, orchestral, chamber, and solo composition, and performance of works from the classical canon. Outside of his classical performance and compositional efforts, however, Jarrett is perhaps best described as an "improviser."

In 1972, Jarrett happened upon what was, to some degree, an entirely new genre of music (or at least one patently unfamiliar to Western audiences), a method of solo performance relying completely upon improvisation. Significantly, these "solo concerts" are not based upon pre-existing thematic material, in the manner of "theme and variations" improvisation. Since performing his first solo concerts in the early 1970s, Jarrett's identity has become associated with this forum perhaps more than any other aspect of his career. Jarrett has recorded dozens of these pieces, which are for the most part widely dissimilar to each other, and certainly unique in the modern musical world.

Success as classical artist

Perhaps most unusual about Jarrett's role in modern music is his chameleon-like ability to successfully traverse musical boundaries. Outside of the jazz medium, where he obviously has made his greatest mark, Jarrett has recorded numerous critically acclaimed versions of canonical classical works. Through these recordings and performances, Jarrett has gained the respect of the classical music establishment to a degree that has eluded other "jazz" musicians; indeed, Jarrett seems one of the few "non-gimmicky" jazz musicians performing classical music. Paradoxically, though Jarrett's own aesthetics seem far removed from the hyper-competitive classical music award circuit, he has garnered the attention of noteworthy international awards panels. (Sadly, as is the case with many American jazz musicians, it is only *outside* of the U.S. that Jarrett has received widespread accolades; in Germany and Japan, Jarrett is treated with the sort of respect and admiration that the American musical world reserves for classical conductors and soloists.) In 2003, Jarrett was awarded the prestigious Polar Music Prize, a Swedish award given annually to two important figures of the music world – past winners have included Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Ravi Shankar.

In terms of Jarrett's reception in the classical arena, reviewers seem to have consistently praised Jarrett's competence, if not always his interpretive vision. The notoriously tough-to-please editors of *The Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* said of Jarrett's recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*, "Keith Jarrett is a highly intelligent and musical player whose readings can hold their own against the current

opposition.”¹⁶ *Time* classical reviewer Michael Walsh boldly stated that “Jarrett’s 1989 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* is the finest since Glenn Gould’s.”¹⁷

Tastes in classical music

Considering his own free-wheeling iconoclasm in jazz, Jarrett’s tastes in classical music seem almost conservative – he has frequently made reference to J.S. Bach and Handel, calling Handel “one of the most underrated composers.”¹⁸ Jarrett also claims to have been inspired by Serge Prokofiev: “Prokofiev’s melodic intelligence is one of the, I think, key elements that ... gave me strength during the years I was trying to find my voice.” Jarrett “unofficially” dedicated the slow movement from his own Sonata for Violin and Piano (1984) to Prokofiev.

Classical recording history

In addition to the *Goldberg Variations* and both books of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Jarrett has recorded J.S. Bach’s complete *French and English Suites*, and on harpsichord, has accompanied Bach’s 6 *Sonatas for Flute and Keyboard*, BWV 1030-1035 (with Michala Petri playing recorder) and Bach’s 3 *Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord*, BWV 1027-1029 (with violist Kim Kashkashian). Jarrett’s classical discography also includes piano concertos of Mozart (he recorded six of these works with esteemed conductor Dennis Russell Davies), two discs of Handel keyboard works, and the 24 Preludes and Fugues by Shostakovich, a work referred to

¹⁶ Ivan Marsh, Edward Greenfield, and Robert Layton. *The Penguin Guide to Compact Discs*. (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 53.

¹⁷ Walsh, “Growing Into the Silence.”

¹⁸ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 100.

by musicologist Wilfrid Mellers as a 20th century version of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.¹⁹ Jarrett's 20th century repertoire consists mostly of music written by tonally-based and often "spiritually inclined" composers. Keith Jarrett has also participated in recordings of new music by the Estonian mystic composer Arvo Pärt as well as the Americans Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Colin McPhee, and Peggy Glanville-Hicks. Though he never recorded these works, in the 1980s Jarrett performed piano concertos by Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, and with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Samuel Barber's piano concerto.

Other musicians who have held dual careers

Of course, it is not entirely uncommon for musicians to "cross over" from one musical camp to another. The classical pianist, conductor, and composer Andre Previn provides perhaps the most famous example of a modern musician with a dual-genre career, although his classical credentials dwarf his achievements in jazz.²⁰ Other well-known classical musicians who have dabbled in what they themselves, or others, have called "jazz" include violinists Itzhak Perlman, Jascha Heifetz, Yehudi Menuhin, and Nigel Kennedy, clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, and pianists Friedrich Gulda, Michel Legrand, and Jean-Yves Thibaudet. At least partially because of the technical demands of most classical music, performers who have come to classical performance from the jazz world are more rare. A list of these performers includes Benny Goodman, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, and recently, one pianist whose career has in a way progressed alongside Jarrett's, his fellow Miles Davis bandmate

¹⁹ Liner notes to Jarrett's recording of these pieces.

Chick Corea. Additionally, the great jazz composer Duke Ellington often succeeded in incorporating elements borrowed from classical music into his jazz compositions, such as large-scale compositional structure, harmonic complexity, and refined orchestration. Interestingly, however, in contrast to Keith Jarrett, Ellington's greatest legacy in jazz lies in his role as a composer, not a performer.

²⁰ As a side note, it is interesting to ponder Previn's puzzling, though perhaps telling, anecdotal criticism of Jarrett's solo concerts: "Anyone can sit at the piano and move their fingers."

Chapter 4: Jarrett in Jazz

Jarrett's pedigree/legacy in jazz

Keith Jarrett's music represents an extension of the jazz tradition, and clearly, it is within the jazz world that Jarrett's music and aesthetics are most easily located.

Though Jarrett himself is reluctant to allow for the validity of assigning categories in music²¹, it seems that it is in the jazz world that Jarrett feels most comfortable. The concept of pedigree plays an important role in jazz history, as individual players have often found recognition and acceptance based on their association with other prominent musicians. For instance, John Coltrane first gained widespread public recognition in the band of Miles Davis, who himself had first become known while playing with Charlie Parker. Keith Jarrett's pedigree boasts membership in what were perhaps jazz's two most famous ensembles for talent grooming, the bands of drummer Art Blakey and trumpeter Miles Davis. Jarrett's recording career began in 1966 with Blakey's Jazz Messengers, a group that from 1954 to 1990 provided apprenticeships for many noteworthy jazz musicians – besides Jarrett, Clifford Brown, Horace Silver, Wayne Shorter, Lee Morgan, Chuck Mangione, and Wynton Marsalis are the best known. After a notable stint with the popular jazz-rock band of saxophonist Charles Lloyd, in 1970 Jarrett was picked up to join what was then the preeminent group in jazz, that of Miles Davis. For three decades, Davis's bands had featured some of the most important figures in jazz, many of whom would go on to

²¹ Jarrett: "We have substituted quantity for quality, and to make up for the lack of real "voices" on these [new] recordings, new categories are constantly being invented. I suppose people say to themselves, 'Well, maybe this alternative will be better than the last. We're tired of that last one.' Of

become leading players and bandleaders in their own right – Coltrane, Bill Evans, and Cannonball Adderly in the 1950s incarnation; Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, and Tony Williams in the 1960s. The 1970s Davis bands continued this trend, and Jarrett counted important musicians such as Chick Corea, Hancock, Jack DeJohnette, and John McLaughlin as fellow members of this ensemble. The fact that Keith Jarrett originates from within this tradition, having performed with what are perhaps the two most important “workshop” bands in jazz history, not only situates Jarrett’s current musical ventures firmly within jazz, but also lends authority and legitimacy to his statements regarding this music. In stark contrast to the modern jazz world’s tendency toward hero-worship, rarely does Jarrett expend energy exalting his predecessors. Thus, two instances where this did occur stand out. Jarrett’s 1990 double-album *Tribute*, in which he uncharacteristically pays homage to legendary jazz musicians such as Lee Konitz, Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Rollins, Jim Hall, and John Coltrane, perhaps gives a clue into Jarrett’s reverence for the jazz tradition. Secondly, Jarrett’s album *Bye Bye Blackbird*, released in 1993, was recorded on October 12, 1991, just two weeks after the death of Miles Davis, and Jarrett dedicated this release to the memory of his former boss Davis.

Role as jazz spokesperson

Jarrett’s 1992 New York Times article is cast by the author himself as a direct response to what might be called the “authoritative vacuum” that came into place in jazz after the death of Miles Davis:

course they are. There was no music there. We all need variety sometimes, but when every channel has nothing, shouldn’t we notice?” (Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.)

Every year the number of musicians who remember why they play music in the first place gets smaller, and the greatest loss from this handful was Miles Davis, who died last year. His death, among other things, prompts these remarks.²²

From the mid-1950s to the early 1990s, a stretch of almost 40 years that encompasses a majority of jazz history, Davis was seen by many as the unofficial authority and “spokesperson” for jazz. With the possible exception of John Coltrane, Davis was the most important jazz musician of the second half of the 20th century – his album *Kind of Blue* is jazz’s most universally acclaimed masterwork, and his groups consistently broke new creative ground. Due to his stature and his own penchant for setting new trends and shifting musical gears, Davis was seen by many to possess an authoritative, if controversial, voice regarding what “jazz” was, as well as where it was headed. Even today, Davis’s 1990 autobiography, *Miles*, written with Quincy Troupe, is practically required reading for jazz musicians and connoisseurs. However, Miles’s reputation for controversy, and the nature of his personality – thorny, uncompromising, and antagonistic – never lent itself to easy media coverage, and Jarrett’s aesthetics follow this example.²³ Perhaps not coincidentally, almost immediately after the death of Miles Davis, jazz seemed to undergo a renaissance of appreciation in the media. The emergence of Wynton Marsalis as media darling and (in Jarrett’s words) “self-appointed jazz expert”²⁴ quite naturally appeared to fill the void left by the notoriously difficult Davis, and so it seems that Jarrett’s comments

²² Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

²³ I recall being a high school jazz fan, sitting with my parents and watching Barbara Walters interview Miles on television. My father’s rather disturbed reaction was “what a *strange* man...”

²⁴ Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

were made in part to counteract this. Certainly Jarrett has taken up Miles Davis's mantle as resident "myth debunker" in jazz – similar to Davis in his own time, no other major jazz figure exists today who espouses such controversial, contentious opinions as does Jarrett. Jarrett offers validation for his *New York Times* article:

When I did that writing, I had in mind young musicians. The people who were buying into the myth. At the time, people were talking about the New Jazz Age, and you just can't be that simplistic. I felt [the media] were not giving young readers enough material to do their own judging.²⁵

Jarrett is notorious not only for his controversial statements about music, but also for his perception as a prickly *artiste* – he is known to berate audiences for what he considers "inattentive" concert behavior – talking, taking flash photography, even coughing. This behavior might derive at least partial inspiration from Davis's infamously curt concert demeanor – Davis would frequently turn his back on his audience while performing. Regarding the contentious tone of his piece, Jarrett offers the following:

Well, somebody has to detonate the water. When you're young you need to hear opinions that you wouldn't normally get to hear by hanging out with all the other people who didn't get to hear them. With the [*New York Times*] piece, I just hoped that it would be read by young musicians. I didn't care if it made the superstars mad... I don't know how to solve the problem, but I do want to alert the people that there is one.²⁶

From the very beginning of his career to the present, Jarrett's sense that he must step in and "alert" or correct misconceptions regarding jazz manifests itself as a constant

²⁵ Keith Jarrett, "Order and Ordeal: A Conversation With Keith Jarrett," interview by Tom Moon, *JazzTimes*, May 1999, 41.

²⁶ Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing: Interview with Keith Jarrett," interview by Ted Rosenthal, *Piano and Keyboard*, January-February 1997 (accessed on 8 June 2004, available at <http://www.tedrosenthal.com/tr-kj.htm>), p. 10.

theme in his writings. One might wonder of course if he “doth protest too much,” for if Jarrett was truly content with his role as a valued jazz musician, perhaps he would not feel compelled to continually “detonate the water.” Based solely upon the sheer number of words he has spilled in defense of what he considers “real” jazz, however, Jarrett is clearly not content with the world outside his recording studio, and he feels a deep desire to criticize. One must note, however, that outside of paying homage to historical figures like John Coltrane, Jarrett never quite articulates who these practitioners of “real” modern jazz might be, other than himself. This dynamic only underscores his desire to feel valued and validated, and as Jarrett creeps up in age, his role as elder statesman of jazz should do nothing to diminish his outspokenness.

Chapter 5: What Jarrett Values About Jazz

Jazz as “organic” music

Of any musical style that he is involved in, Jarrett clearly values jazz the most. The element of jazz most appreciated by Jarrett, perhaps, is the potential jazz performers have to express what he might call “organic” music making. Jarrett has made numerous statements praising the creative freedoms and openness allowed in jazz; indeed, it seems that Jarrett believes that without openness and flow, *music* does not occur.

As far as music is concerned, they [the jazz musicians] are as open as one can be, and that is precisely the essence, the essential in music. That is why I go as far as to claim that jazz is the most precious music that we still have in the modern world.²⁷

Clearly, Jarrett favors the unified entity of composer/performer/interpreter that lies at the heart of jazz. To Jarrett, improvisation provides the best opportunity for this scenario, to the point where seems to possess an inherent mistrust of “interpreters” who are not composers themselves:

So many interpreters are not composers and not improvisers. It boggles my mind that they can even think they know how to play somebody’s else’s music just by learning their biographies.²⁸

²⁷ Klaus Umbach, “Musik sagen, Kasse meinen,” *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg, 1992), 321, quoted in Gernot Blume, “Musical Practices and Identity Construction in the Work of Keith Jarrett,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1998), 151.

²⁸ Robert L. Doerschuk, “The Reluctant Virtuoso, Provocative Reflections on Creativity and the Crisis in Modern Music,” *Keyboard*, March 1993, 85, as quoted in Blume, 264.

Jazz as a multiplicity of musical approaches

Another element of jazz that attracts Jarrett is the potential the form contains for a multiplicity of musical influences. Jarrett imagines jazz as a uniquely American hodgepodge of interactive cultural borrowing and ingenuity. In a way, Jarrett's unending, broad musical eclecticism mirrors the very nature of jazz itself, a music forged out of so many different paths.

I think jazz – no matter what we end up spending hours talking around the table with other so-called jazz experts – there is an essence that's American... because there's a mingling of cultures in that music that's not existing anywhere else. It would be as if you were to write poetry in more than one language at a time, and make it somehow into a coherent language of its own. The instruments that are used are instruments that were not invented for jazz, with the possible exception of a couple of them – they were adapted. So the whole thing is indicative of America at its best.²⁹

To Jarrett then, “organic” music requires a connection to local geography, and he identifies jazz as America's truest form of musical artistry. In this sense that he is desiring to articulate an intrinsically “American” musical viewpoint, Jarrett shares impulses with American composers like Charles Ives and Aaron Copland.

Many people think that the world should speak the same language... But I don't agree. If that was the way the earth was two hundred years ago, we would have no jazz. We would have no folk music to listen to from anywhere else. We would have only one thing, it would be like New Age music forever. So to me something local is important. Something that's only in a certain geography.³⁰

Jarrett pines for the dynamism of the jazz scene during his formative years of 1960s, insisting that today's music places inordinate emphasis on technique. Jarrett's not-so

²⁹ Keith Jarrett, transcribed from recorded ECM promotional CD interview with Timothy Hill, ECMDJ-20004-2, 1994.

oblique personal reference to a “technician/godhead” in the following statement is almost certainly to Wynton Marsalis:

The incredible breadth of musical styles represented by [1960s era jazz musicians] means that jazz was what it was supposed to be: a melting pot of truly original voices. Of course, in [today’s] age of insane fascination with technical achievement ... elevating a mere technician to godhead is, finally, possible... But don't call it genius.³¹

³⁰ Keith Jarrett, “In Search of Folk Roots,” 114.

³¹ Keith Jarrett, “The Virtual Jazz Age, A Survival Manual,” *Musician*, March 1996, 34.

Chapter 6: Jarrett's Views on Classical vs. Jazz Processes

Comparisons

In 1994, ECM released two recordings simultaneously, one featuring new classical works by Jarrett, the other containing a live performance of Jarrett's trio at the Deer Head Inn near Allentown, Pennsylvania, a place that Jarrett had frequented early on in his career. Regarding these recordings, Jarrett comments on the different processes required in jazz and classical performing, and compares the potentialities of the two projects, clearly favoring the freedoms allowed in his jazz project.

(interviewer Timothy Hill, regarding recording with the orchestra): Is there anything like what happened at the Deer Head?

Jarrett: No, that only happens in jazz...Everything you could say of one thing was the opposite on the other project. I didn't have to care about Paul³², but I had to care about every [orchestral] soloist. Paul cared for himself because he was just trying to be there for the music, but *there wasn't any music until he played*. And then with the orchestra thing, *everybody was already aware of the music*, and were worried about their role, and I had to de-tox the anxiety each person had.³³

In a manner perhaps paradoxically similar to Marsalis, Jarrett has a penchant for making absolutist (and some might say ego-heavy) statements regarding the "correct" way to play jazz, the blues, or even music in general. Given this degree of self-absorption, one wonders if Jarrett might deem *any* other musician, outside of his select group of compatriots, capable of playing good music at all. This said, Jarrett's specific points regarding the performance of written music, as contrasted with the true

³² Paul Motian, former drummer with Jarrett's 1970s "American Quartet," filled in for the unavailable Jack DeJohnette on this recording – this is the only recorded example of this substitution occurring.

³³ Transcribed from recorded interview with Timothy Hill, 1994, my italics.

nature of improvised music, remain relevant, and come from a perspective unlike almost anyone else's in contemporary music.

With comparisons to classical processes, Keith Jarrett's philosophy and music seem to run completely against the grain of that unceasing twentieth-century Schönbergian-borne dilemma – the validity of tonal music vs. atonal or so-called “twelve-tone” music. Jarrett's improvised music circumvents this debate completely, and his musical practices to some degree offer a way out of the conundrum. In a good deal of Jarrett's improvisations, his solo concerts especially, large portions of his music are fiercely atonal, while others portions are unabashedly tonal. In a way, the two provide balance for one another. However, it is *the method* by which Jarrett arrives at atonality that, at least for him, validates this approach – Jarrett's atonality is “earned” organically through a real-life musical process, whereas the music of “atonal composers” is paper-bound, and therefore, perhaps self-consciously “theoretical.”

Difficulty in playing both forms

As I've mentioned, it seems that it is exceedingly rare in modern music for a *performer* to successfully exist within both the jazz and classical music worlds. Most often, a musician coming from one sphere into the other is not accepted in the new arena; the common knock is that the technical and artistic demands of one musical form are incompatible with those of the other. For instance, whereas many jazz players value a free-wheeling, individually determined instrumental sound and

approach to music-making, classical players have more clearly defined models of acceptability. This is only natural; orchestral players and classical soloists are *realizing* music written by someone else, and thus are bound to satisfy certain expectations and follow specific strictures of style. Jazz players have a greater degree of autonomy over the “music” that they are playing – not only the specific notes, but the rhythms, dynamics, and phrasing – these elements, most of which are pre-scripted (by the composer) in classical music, are created spontaneously during performance by jazz musicians. Additionally, to a certain degree, jazz encourages individualistic musical approaches, and it is generally assumed that jazz players “finding their voice” will determine the specific attributes that make up their own sound and approach. In Jarrett’s words, “Jazz never demands that you work on a particular thing. It’s up to the player to decide whether that’s what they’re going to do.”³⁴ This clearly contrasts with the specificity of classical pedagogical approaches, which seem to lay out a more clearly defined, goal-oriented path for students. Jarrett comments on what he sees as the necessity of keeping the two forms separate:

If a player gets used to not disappearing into the music completely and starts thinking about the kind of details you have to think about in classical performance, that’s *not* what you should be doing when you play the blues. Jazz isn’t really as much about the how, as it is the ideas that you’re coming up with.³⁵

On the flip side of course, the technical precision and instrumental mastery demanded in the performance of classical music is not necessarily reflected in jazz, where many players can “get away with” mistakes that wouldn’t pass muster in classical music.

³⁴ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 2.

³⁵ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 2.

One oft-repeated, half-joking, yet telling line in jazz is “If you make a mistake, repeat it, and it’ll sound like you meant it!” Often, innovations in jazz come about as a result of practices that do not adhere to traditional notions of “instrumental mastery.” One of Jarrett’s musical heroes, the maverick saxophonist Ornette Coleman, turned the jazz world on its head in the early 1960s, yet as a saxophonist Coleman was *anything but* “technically proficient” in the traditional sense. In terms of sheer instrumental technique, Coleman’s contrast with the preeminent alto saxophone virtuoso Charlie Parker, could not be greater.

For as much as it is stressed that jazz and classical music share common musical vocabulary and demand a common sort of dedication, in actuality the two are not only different forms, but require vastly different musical approaches, following distinct methods and philosophies of performance. It seems that it is this factor, rather than mere technical constraints, that actually provides the largest stumbling block to musicians attempting to “cross over.” In typically curt fashion, Jarrett speaks of this difficulty: “I think if someone sat down and looked at the people who play jazz and classical music, it’s almost 100 percent across the board that they don’t really have an individual jazz voice.”³⁶

Public perceptions of jazz vs. “reality”

Of course, to many audiences (and fellow musicians), if it “looks and sounds” like jazz, then it must *be* jazz; however, Jarrett’s aesthetic clearly holds that “real” jazz depends most vitally on developing and maintaining an individual voice in music,

aspects of music-making that are for the most part discouraged in classical music. To Jarrett's mind, those who have not made this journey, so to speak, are not connecting with the true nature of music. He makes pointed criticisms toward musicians who approach jazz from a classical perspective.

If you think about who these people are and take them one by one, they might be curios, but have not really contributed something lasting. You become a musicologist when you become a classical player. You go back to jazz and if you're a musicologist, then you become like a jazz professor. That's OK, but that's going to probably steal from the transcendent nature of that dive, you know?³⁷

Over the past twenty years, the field of jazz pedagogy has expanded at an exponential rate. Any young jazz student learning the music will find him or herself awash in jazz camps, high school and college competitions, countless jazz instruction manuals and "play-a-long" albums, online tutorials, and a proliferation of jazz studies programs at major music schools. This expansion has resulted in an unprecedented number of young musicians gravitating toward jazz, yet in Jarrett's view, this expansion has done more harm than good. What worries Jarrett most is how the instructors preach a limited, doctrinal version of jazz, one that can be explained and taught in the same way that chorale part-writing can be taught. In these statements, Jarrett touches upon what makes Jarrett himself such a fascinating figure – in his all-knowing absolutism, he practically dares reviewers to find fault with his opinions, yet all the while he retreats into a protected zone of mysticism, where any "theory" dealing with jazz is immediately irrelevant.

³⁶ Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 2.

³⁷ Ibid.

Jazz is probably the only art form whose existence depends on resistance to theories. If someone is an expert on jazz, you can be pretty sure he/she is not a vital jazz musician.³⁸

I don't know any time when a pseudo educator has been the prominent artist in jazz. I don't know other professions where the educators are the players at all. And then to hold this position that if you just follow these steps and listen to these records, come on. Jazz is one of the least learnable art forms. Who are we kidding here?³⁹

It's only ignorant people who think they're experts. At times, I think nobody should be a teacher and a player. Because part of the education process involves grouping things and organizing things, listening in categories. What this does is polarize the listening. It develops people who listen for this particular thing, not to the music. Listening to see if certain criteria are being met. ... When you are concerned with teaching, part of the work is to present an order, a way of looking at something. Well, [with] all great artists, part of that work is questioning first causes, the beginnings of things. The artist has to be looking outside of that orderly vision, challenging it.⁴⁰

Jarrett staunchly refuses to allow for “easy labeling” when it comes to jazz, consistently valuing content over packaging or “image”:

It doesn't matter how many guys get together and form a band, and how many people are in the audience, and it doesn't matter how many records they sell. If it's just competent or talented players playing together in a jazz format, it still isn't jazz – doesn't make jazz.⁴¹

In his criticism, Jarrett is claiming exclusive authority to dictate what constitutes jazz, criticizing what he sees as a lazy or uneducated public. To the vast majority of the public, “jazz” is perceived to be an instantly recognizable musical style, and therefore is, to some degree, no less laden with burdens of expectation than is classical music. Public perceptions of “jazz” most often hold this music to be a swing-based, esoteric,

³⁸ Keith Jarrett, “The Virtual Jazz Age.”

³⁹ Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 41.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 42.

⁴¹ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 10.

historical form, performed predominantly by African-American musicians. The vast majority of training programs for young jazz musicians focus on a historically narrow vision of this music, canonizing 1950s bebop and early 1960s hard bop as the “styles” to learn and recreate, at times verbatim.⁴² Conveniently left out of this pedagogical system is free jazz. As a historical movement running from the late 1950s to the present, this same music that obsessed John Coltrane in his last years, is certainly as “influential” as bebop. As perhaps the most widely recognized jazz musician advocating free jazz today, Jarrett defends this musical practice:

People who don’t “understand” free playing (like Wynton Marsalis, Ken Burns, etc.) are not free to see it as an amazingly important part of the true jazz history. Where’s the form? Don’t ask. Don’t think. Don’t anticipate. Just participate. It’s all there somewhere inside. And then suddenly it forms itself.⁴³

Conservatory/preservationist approach to jazz

Much of this approach toward “learning jazz” emanates from the conservatory mindset, where preservation and “conservation” are premium goals. Yet to many in the jazz community, including Keith Jarrett, this system encourages an inaccurate, limited view of what jazz constitutes. To Jarrett, “jazz” is not a museum piece fit for study in the academy, but a way of being, an invitation to experience process.

Thomas Conrad describes Jarrett’s way with process:

Jarrett’s primary gift as an improviser is the ability to involve the listener in the creative act as it unfolds (hence the unprecedented popularity of his spontaneous solo piano albums). We think and discover and feel with him.⁴⁴

⁴² As a conservatory-trained jazz musician myself (Eastman School of Music), I can relate personal experiences of being assigned to learn transcriptions of jazz solos “note for note.”

⁴³ Liner notes to *Inside/Out*, 2000.

⁴⁴ Thomas Conrad, *DownBeat*, December 1995.

Jarrett seems dead-set against the movement to canonize jazz as if it were classical music, feeling that focusing so much energy on dealing with “the past” makes the possibility of creating music in the present moment infinitely more difficult. The following statement provides a marked contrast with preservationist attitudes held by much of jazz academia and trumpeter-educator Wynton Marsalis.

I’d rather have all the music I ever heard disappear rather than have it canonized. If the whole music world canceled itself, and everyone either had no memory of hearing music or no recordings, we would be ready to hear again.⁴⁵

Jazz is there and gone. It happens. You have to be present for it. That simple.⁴⁶

Of course, a rather obvious paradox appears here – if Jarrett is so enthusiastic about making music not occurring in the present “disappear,” why is he such a prolific releaser of his own recordings? One answer may lie in Jarrett’s need to feel appreciated – he is human, and most likely his desire to be recognized outweighs his stated wish for complete non-identification with past performances. This desire appears in bold relief when held up to the re-emergence of jazz in popular culture, and as a vital jazz musician of the 1970s, Jarrett may feel the need to maintain his reputation, not to mention his career as a financially successful musician.

In fact, much of Jarrett’s criticism of the modern jazz world comes as a direct reaction to this so-called “young lions” movement in jazz, beginning in the mid-1980s.

⁴⁵ Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 42.

During this time, jazz garnered an unprecedented amount of media coverage; however, the vast majority of it seemed focused on “up-and-coming” jazz musicians, almost all of whom reflected a neo-conservative, hard-bop approach in their music. Most notably, during this time, Wynton Marsalis became recognized as a sort of unofficial jazz savior by the national media. As current Artistic Director of Jazz @ Lincoln Center, Marsalis has bankrolled his early attention as a marketable celebrity into a multi-million dollar cultural empire that, at least in Jarrett’s view, perpetuates almost exclusively a conservative, historically centered vision of jazz. Jarrett’s articulates his issues with this situation:

When time goes on and the imitation is accepted as greater than the original, there’s a severe flaw somewhere. When how you play is more important than whether you’re actually making music, or when how you look sells what you do, then you know we’re behind the older times.⁴⁷

Of course, no one would argue that increasing overall respect for jazz and jazz musicians is a negative phenomenon. Many important American jazz musicians have led difficult lives marked by hardship and destitution. What Jarrett dislikes, however, is what he feels to be a system that actively encourages an almost disrespectful “imitation” of jazz, a museum-format not in line with what he considers to be the true nature of the jazz process. In this sense, Jarrett appears acutely willing to “let go” of jazz, content to embark on a fresh form unburdened by preconceived historical notions of correctness. Jarrett comments on this danger of “over-respecting”:

If the guys who did the stuff that we know who are forever great, if those guys didn’t need the kind of respect that you’re talking about to do what they did, then I don’t see [how] it has any role to play at all. It reminds me

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 10.

of setting up a museum. That's what you put in museums, things that are finished. So maybe it is finished. Let's come to terms with that instead of trying to find the wrong audience for it. To me that's all they're going to do.⁴⁸

Music as “object”

To Jarrett, the world of classical music training appears as an empty abyss. Music students are almost never expected to compose or improvise their own music; the music they perform almost always comes from someone else. For performers, conservatory training focuses on “interpreting” music written by the classical masters, and even most composers are not expected to perform their own works. The vast majority of music theory and history classes required for conservatory students are focused on the analysis of European classical music, almost to the exclusion of any other modes of musical creation. Music theory students are expected to possess the ability to “break apart” sections of music within pieces, in order to discover meaning or intention, or uncover technical craft. This valuation of rational, objectified music has resulted in the perpetuation of what might be deemed a stylized, laissez-faire approach to music-making. Though it may “come alive” through performance, “the music” is most often viewed as a sterile, paper-bound object that needs rehearsing and dissecting prior to its re-enactment. It is this objectified system of music-making that Jarrett most ardently opposes in his writings and interviews.

When you hear a great drummer, what you respond to is the flow. Not the “individual elements of his rhythm.” Elvin Jones has a certain motion in his playing. Music should be a stream. Not like a series of disconnected bits.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 9.

Jarrett is reluctant to view his own music as an object; he has made specific comments regarding his desire to “de-objectify” his solo concerts, allowing the emphasis to be placed on process, as opposed to objectified results. Perhaps deriving influence from Eastern philosophies of “non-identification,” Jarrett seeks to envelop himself entirely in the flow of improvisation. In his desire to renounce his ego and simply surrender to the inclinations of his muse, Jarrett’s aesthetic stands far removed from the emphasis on technique found in classical music.

The one thing that has governed what I’ve done, throughout my musical career, has been not to identify with something I did. The minute I would identify with what I’m playing, I wouldn’t hear the next thing, and that’s particularly true of solo playing. You just cannot go and improvise music if you’re hearing what you do and considering it to be yours.⁵⁰

Jarrett is unwilling to break music apart in terms of distinct “musical ideas,” claiming “I don’t even think there’s such a thing as an idea – a ‘musical idea.’ There’s either music or there’s not.”⁵¹ He speaks of his reluctance to break apart music harmonically: “I play piano, but I don’t believe in chords, in the sense that they’re vertical structures.”⁵² This valuation of an “organic” music-making process provides an undercurrent that runs through Jarrett’s criticisms of classical music.

When classical players talk to each other, they hardly ever talk about *the* music. They talk about *some* music, like a passage of music, or a bar, or a phrase, or how you interpret this dotted quarter note.⁵³

⁴⁹ Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 42.

⁵⁰ Rockwell, 181.

⁵¹ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 5.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 154, my italics.

In musical terms, Jarrett's version of organic music also has a great deal to do with maintaining a flexible rhythmic feel. Jarrett's musical career began with his involvement in late 1960s and 1970s free jazz, within which the steady, metronomic flow of rhythm found in earlier jazz (and certainly classical music), was often usurped for a looser, dynamic sense of pulse.

I collect watches because I'm very interested in time. Now with everyone wearing a digital watch, it says time goes in a straight line... one, two, three, four, five, six. Time does not move like that. It's never perfect either. Digital time is like record production. In record production we have the bass, then you say now we add the vocalist, now we have the conga drums, we go this way – one, two, three, four. Real music, when people play together, is like this: you come together, you go away, you come together. There are no edges, no sharp edges.⁵⁴

Regarding his seminal 1986 improvised “folk” recording *Spirits*, Jarrett compares his own rhythmic process to the uneven flow of the human heartbeat: “I wasn’t even concerned with keeping time perfectly. In fact, sometimes it was important that the time be more like heartbeats, and heartbeats are not perfect.”⁵⁵

Influence of classical music on Jarrett's music

Keith Jarrett stands out above all as an individual, for he belongs to neither the jazz nor the classical worlds exclusively, but more to a world dictated by his own muse. Jarrett navigates the rocky terrain between the jazz and classical worlds principally by placing focus on his own relationship to making music. In Jarrett's own perception,

⁵⁴ Keith Jarrett, “In Search of Folk Roots,” interview by Kimihiko Yamashita, *On Music*, The Ecco Press: Hopewell, NJ, 1994, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Liner notes to *Spirits*, 1986.

his widely varied approaches to music and genre-crossing are natural acts based entirely upon inner directives.

I think of my musical evolution as being completely straightforward. I have moved into various categories when each one of those categories seemed to be the closest thing to the music within me.⁵⁶

However, having played classical music from his youth as a child prodigy in Allentown, PA,⁵⁷ Jarrett's prodigious technical ability on the piano is inconceivable without the discipline of classical training. As an adult, Jarrett has continued to develop his technique, and has commented on the influence of classical playing on this development: "I have become a better pianist... than I was before by virtue of practicing and diligent discipline."⁵⁸ This statement might seem to contrast with his stated belief that jazz cannot be practiced, yet herein lies one of the rare occasions when Jarrett speaks in strictly analytical, technical terms; however briefly, he is at times capable of isolating technique from process.

Jarrett is certainly not the first jazz player to come to jazz with the pedigree of classical training, yet what is rare about him is that he has retained and carried over into his jazz playing the sense of pristine pianistic *touch*. His background in classical music has surely influenced his approach to the keyboard as a jazz artist. Jarrett discusses how playing Mozart has influenced his jazz playing:

Playing Mozart helped me know what I can do with ballads and melody. You don't get that kind of challenge in jazz. If you're a jazz player, you

⁵⁶ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 40.

⁵⁷ Jarrett gave his first public piano recital at the age of 6.

⁵⁸ Art Lange, "The Keith Jarrett Interview," *Down Beat*, 1984, 63, as quoted in Blume, 202.

don't want to be precise; you want to be loose. You have to be dirty and asymmetrical.⁵⁹

It might seem natural to speculate whether the flip side of this is true, that Jarrett's classical playing might be influenced by his background in jazz, but according to him, the influence moves primarily from classical to jazz.

Technically as a pianist it doesn't move from jazz to classical, it moves the other way. So I can play ballads with more micro-variations of touch, now that I've been working on Mozart, than I might have had before.⁶⁰

You can't let that clarity you can develop [from classical performing] become something you use in jazz because it would be like hearing a white Oscar Peterson solo!⁶¹

How Jarrett's aesthetic allows him to play both forms

One of Jarrett's most unusual and unique attributes as a musician is his ability to successfully inhabit both the classical and jazz worlds. One element that sets Jarrett apart in the jazz world is his deep knowledge of and respect for classical music. Interviewer Mike Zwerin claims to have held a half-hour discussion with Jarrett regarding equal intonation as postulated by the seventeenth-century theorist Andreas Werckmeister.⁶² Jarrett's recorded versions of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, as well as the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*, both performed on harpsichord, employs what is known as Werckmeister Three tuning. In Zwerin's words, Jarrett can be seen as "a

⁵⁹ Keith Jarrett, "Someday we'll all be free," interview by Kristi York, *Vibes*, 20 February 2003, accessed on 8 June 2004, available from http://www.atlantacreativeloafing.com/2002-02-20/vibes_feature2.html

⁶⁰ Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶² Keith Jarrett, "Sons of Miles"

jazzman who feels the need to out-research classical specialists to prove his legitimacy.”⁶³

Jarrett feels that his participation in jazz and classical music benefit one another. He describes this relationship: “The resonance between them (classical and jazz) is what I need . . . they cannot be close to each other, but they are highly susceptible to gaining from each other.”⁶⁴ However, by Jarrett’s own description, his approach to classical performing is markedly different from his process as a jazz improviser. For Jarrett, in his desire to carry on a dual career, his artistic vision is only sustained if he keeps the two areas entirely *separate* from one another. For instance, Jarrett has clearly stated that he would never perform “classical” on the first half of a concert, and “jazz on the second.” This obviously ties into Jarrett’s reluctance to attempt improvisation in a self-consciously “historical” style.

Shut down all the other doors and just open the one you’re working on. This is what I think is so hilarious about “crossover,” so called. I don’t think you can do both things unless you have a certain kind of insanity that you are conscious of and you create it . . . Your system demands different circuitry for either of those two things.⁶⁵

For all the criticism that Jarrett directs toward what he sees as a classical music world too dependent on interpretation, he does value playing classical music. This is obviously the case, otherwise Jarrett wouldn’t bother to prepare and record this music. However, another deep paradox appears here, in which Jarrett contradicts his

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ ECM promotional website, accessed on 8 June 2004, available at <http://www.pressnetwork.com/prarch/Jarretpr.htm>

⁶⁵ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 2.

own statements regarding the inferiority of playing “other people’s” music. His following comments about “finding depth” in other people’s music contradicts his stated views that musicians “not speaking with their own voices” are not creating organic music. However, in terms of Jarrett’s desire to somehow disable his ego while playing *any* kind of music, this acceptance of “someone else’s music” as means to achieving an ecstatic state is perfectly acceptable.

Improvisation is really the deepest way to deal with moment-to-moment reality in music. There is no deeper way, personally deeper. But there is no less depth in working with someone else’s music – having found his depth becomes exactly the same. And the people who think the two things are different are going to lose out when they come to listen to one or the other.⁶⁶

In response to some classical critics who have ridiculed both Jarrett’s reserved performance style as well as his rather conservative original classical works, Jarrett defends his aesthetic in terms of its very breadth and exploratory nature.

When audiences decide what they think someone is great *at*, they tend to undervalue other things that same someone does. One example in the Romantic era is Chopin, whose concerti are looked at as examples of bad orchestration rather than beautiful musical ideas, because we “know” Chopin mastered the *solo* piano genre.⁶⁷

Consistent piano sound

A recent review by Tim Page in the *Washington Post* of a classical piano recital by a prominent pianist contains the following: “A listener has the sense that [...] is *demonstrating the proper way to play a piece rather than playing it for us outright*.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 149.

⁶⁷ Liner notes to Jarrett’s recording of the Handel *Suites for Keyboard* (ECM New Series 1530, 1993).

⁶⁸ Tim Page, “The Keys to Wisdom,” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2004, C5, my italics.

Jarrett's performance aesthetic stands in stark contrast to a criticism like this; one aspect of Jarrett's musical aesthetic is the absolute commitment and focus that he imparts to each one of his excursions. To label Jarrett as a mere musical chameleon seems to do injustice to his uncanny ability to place *his own* voice within the stream of whatever he happens to be performing. Regardless of the context, Jarrett always "sounds" like Jarrett – his sound on the piano is crystal clean, nimble footed, simultaneously pensive and joyful. These characteristics lend themselves as easily to the pre-composed, rigorous counterpoint of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* as they do to improvised jazz; Jarrett's consummate musicianship is carried over into all aspects of his music-making.

Relationship to the piano

Drummer Jack DeJohnette, recognized as one of the greatest drummers in jazz, has been playing music with Jarrett since both were members of Miles Davis's band. (DeJohnette is now the drummer for the Keith Jarrett Trio, a group that has been in existence for over twenty years.) DeJohnette comments on Jarrett's intimate connection to the piano:

The one thing that struck me about Keith, that made him stand out from other players, was that he really seemed to have a love affair with the piano, it's a relationship with that instrument... I've never seen anybody have such a rapport with their instrument and know its limitations but also push them to the limits, transcending the instrument.⁶⁹

Indeed, Keith Jarrett possesses a closer relationship to his instrument than almost any other major figure in contemporary music. Jarrett even goes so far as to say that

“some pianos have more personality than some people.” Yet what is strange is Jarrett’s continual frustration with pianos, as if he were always in search of the perfect instrument, but never able to find it. Jarrett’s most famous recording, *The Köln Concert*, was recorded live on a piano that Jarrett himself describes as “a seven-foot piano which hadn’t been adjusted for a very long time and sounded like a very poor imitation of a harpsichord or a piano with tacks in it.”⁷⁰ This opinion is in fact verified by the recording; what Jarrett is able to draw forth from this clearly inferior instrument is astounding. In addition, Jarrett has continually claimed that the piano does *not* provide the most faithful representation of “the music he hears” when he improvises. This provides a good example of the often paradoxical and idealistic nature of Jarrett’s aesthetics; his relationship with the piano is clearly a love/hate affair. “Once I’m playing the piano, it’s a relatively, in my opinion, boring instrument! That’s why I work so hard to get more out of it.”⁷¹ Thus, Jarrett’s 1986 recording *Spirits*, performed almost entirely on “ethnic” instruments, was made partially to remedy his rather arbitrary and externally enforced dependence on the piano.

Detractors in classical music

It should be noted, however, that although Jarrett is almost universally accepted as a jazz player, his classical recordings are by no means without detractors. What surprises a good deal of reviewers is what they take to be a rather “straight-laced” performance style in Jarrett’s classical performances, coming from the fingers of an

⁶⁹ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 46.

⁷⁰ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 71.

artist known in the jazz world for his risk-taking and experimental nature. Jarrett's activities in the classical world are marked by sober diligence and moral exactitude, qualities that seem diametrically opposite to his free-wheeling, unrestrained improvisations in jazz. This common perception that Jarrett's interpretations are sterile and flat has in fact turned away some fans away from Jarrett's classical recordings. Some of his behaviors, of course, may be attributed to Jarrett's battle to "prove himself" to a world that he does feel entirely at home in, yet to assume that this completely explains his rather restrained vision of classical interpretation is to discount Jarrett's formidable intellectual capacities.

Jarrett's offers his own justifications for his recordings of Bach's music, music that has of course been recorded numerous times.

I'm trying to find a place between the dryness of Glenn Gould and the approach embodied in the idea that each prelude and fugue is like a cathedral window, which is rubbish. Bach is about ideas, not grand flourishes.⁷²

Reviewer Dermot Clinch, from the *New Statesman*, compares Jarrett's performance of a Mozart concerto with versions by pianists Daniel Barenboim and Sviatoslav Richter, and claims that Jarrett plays Mozart "so prosaically as to sound comic."⁷³

The work begins with seething orchestral syncopations, builds dark, half-lit operatic climaxes, and sets a mood of brooding urgency, until the piano drops into sudden calm a sentence of recitative-like plainness. Daniel Barenboim colors the phrase gently. Sviatoslav Richter nudges it urgently. Keith Jarrett pronounces it with grim monotony, deflating the orchestra's entire enterprise thus far. Why? Why does a great jazz

⁷¹ Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 4.

⁷² Keith Jarrett, "The Well-Tempered Jazz Band."

⁷³ Dermot Clinch, "Mind Over Mozart," *New Statesman*, June 14, 1999.

improviser, one of the technically best-equipped of jazz pianists, whose technique in classical music is not in doubt, do this?⁷⁴

In the context of Jarrett's aesthetics, Jarrett's response to this is that he does not believe in adding external "emotion" or "feeling" to music that is not his. In the words of Jarrett's producer Manfred Eicher, what Jarrett seeks is an "evocation of emotion determined by a resistance of emotion."⁷⁵

Musician magazine said the following about Jarrett's Bach recordings:

When we listen to Jarrett, we get the feeling that we're seeing past the accretions of history directly into the essence of Bach.⁷⁶

Conductor and early music authority Christopher Hogwood, on Jarrett's recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, writes:

Very nice. Some people love it; other people say it's boring and dull. Some say it's underplayed... Keith would aim at what I would call a non-Grand Maestro type of approach, not putting up too big a wall between the composer and the public, but being more transparent... [like] him [Jarrett] as the mouthpiece of Mozart. Which I like.⁷⁷

In this remark, which contains a bit of his often biting humor, Jarrett comments on those who criticize his "straight"-laced classical performance style:

What their thinking is... now this to me is egotism. They assume they know who I am by what I've recorded already. To me that's ridiculous. I don't know who anybody is no matter how many recordings they make. ... When you assume things you apply those on the following act. When you read someone's book and you think it's great, and you buy their next

⁷⁴ Dermot Clinch, "Mind Over Mozart," *New Statesman*, June 14, 1999.

⁷⁵ Liner notes to the *Vienna Concert* (ECM 1481, 1991).

⁷⁶ ECM promotional sticker on Jarrett's recording of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*.

⁷⁷ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 180.

book and instead of getting where they've moved on to, you're disappointed because it isn't like the other one. Now the privilege of the arts is that it doesn't have to follow those rules. The rest of life does, you know? You can't come home to your wife and be completely unrecognizable!⁷⁸

Jarrett's attitude toward classical critics here invokes the spirit of Miles Davis, who received unending pressure from critics in the 1960s and 70s who continually complained that Davis had "moved away" from the successful music of his *Kind of Blue* period. Like Jarrett, Davis was a tireless musical explorer, never content to celebrate his past successes, and always involved in whatever project he had undertaken at the present. As a musician, Davis was also remarkably difficult to pigeonhole, and Jarrett's open flouting of musical categories follows this tradition. Jarrett defends his wide range of musical activity as such:

An artist "stylizes" something by viewing it in *his* way and immediately this view becomes a "law" by which an audience recognizes an artist. If this "law" changes at any time the audience must justify its lack of recognition by such things as "He's lost his touch" or "He's gone commercial" or "Well, he's getting old" or "He's trying to be mysterious" or "above our heads" etc., but never "He's discovering and utilizing all the aspects of himself that he finds" and, of course, those aspects are numberless.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 11.

⁷⁹ Liner notes to Jarrett's double-album of original classical compositions, *In The Light* (ECM 1033/34, 1973).

Chapter 7: Jarrett's Views on Interpretation

Interpretation

Because Jarrett's artistic eclecticism in large part hinges upon his assuming a wide range of performance styles, it would seem that Jarrett might have a good deal to say about the question of interpretation. In fact, it is in this area that Jarrett focuses a good deal of his criticism about the performance of classical music.

That experience should be known for what it is. It should not be made more of, which I think it is in these modern intellectual days. It shouldn't be made to be the goal of a musician. ... The goal should not be to play other people's music better than somebody else, or make something new out of music that already exists that is only yours. ... That's not a big enough goal. The goal would be to be yourself enough not to care whether this is yours or not, and make that other person's music bloom for itself somehow.⁸⁰

Authenticity

In classical music, disputes over the most correct or "authentic" interpretation seem unending. Given the nature of classical music, an art form that depends so heavily on the past, much of this debate seems inevitable. The term "classical music" is of course rather meaningless, as any attempt to bunch 1,000+ years of European musical history into one neatly packaged marketing term is obviously pointless. In the context of modern American culture, however, which provides the playing field for Jarrett and his ideas, "classical music" might be loosely defined as the European art music inherited from the past 400 years. The "early music" movement, originating

⁸⁰ Transcribed from recorded interview with Timothy Hill, 1994.

during the 1970s, did much to challenge assumptions and expand public awareness of pre-Classical modes of music-making, and groups like the Kronos Quartet and Bang on a Can have done much to promote new music. Yet perhaps more than any other influence, it is the conservatories and preparatory schools who continue to dictate the boundaries of American high-culture. The conservatory approach to music-making, at least in Jarrett's view, forsakes the development of individual, creative musical voice for instrumental and stylistic "mastery." The end goals of this system are geared toward economic concerns – winning competitions, record contracts or orchestra jobs, or simply securing gainful employment as musicians – just as strongly as toward the satisfaction of artistic merits. Jarrett frequently laments classical music's over-dependence on competition. (Even the way that Jarrett's playing is described by the *Penguin Guide* reviewers supports this – "a player whose readings can hold their own against the current opposition" – which seems to suggest that by releasing a recording of Bach's music, Jarrett's intention is to somehow compete with other "opposing" pianists who have recorded the same material.) Thus, the classical music educational system, where individual music-making is subjugated to the restricted artistic and economic dictates of the marketplace, seems inherently structured as the antithesis of the world Jarrett dreams of. Thus, to Jarrett, debates over realizing the most "authentic" way to perform classical music are in their very nature flawed. If, as in Jarrett's view, the most "authentic" way to create music is to "be yourself" in that music, presumably through composition or improvisation, then a system which allows *only* for the performance and "interpretation" of music written by others is clearly insufficient. To Jarrett, *no* contemporary performance of classical

music, music that was most likely composed in a different culture, perhaps hundreds of years ago, will ever accurately convey the nature of the composer's intent.

If you don't have a relationship with the state that produced the phrase, you can't be as good a player of the music... No modern recording is ever going to live up to the patina... it's part of history, it came from the same time when the thing was being done.⁸¹

Significantly, Keith Jarrett made his name *outside* this classical arena, yet his knowledge of classical music appears to be deep and well-informed. In fact, Jarrett's status as an outsider not dependent on "the system" may allow him to recognize aspects of the classical establishment that might not be questioned by others.⁸² Because his musical career does not depend on appeasing this world, Jarrett is perhaps more free to speak his mind.

Non-interpretation

Ultimately, what sets Jarrett's classical playing apart from most other classical performers is his refusal to impose an individually determined "interpretation" upon music that he did not compose himself, music that he sees as "not his." Not coincidentally, it seems that this very reluctance to interpret is what generates the criticism of classical reviewers, who are perhaps accustomed to hearing and judging music in strict qualitative terms. Writer Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich sees this Jarrett's impulse in the manner of an artist operating at extreme poles – in jazz, Jarrett is the freest of free; in classical, Jarrett is as restrained as can be.

⁸¹ Carr, 128.

⁸² In his PhD dissertation on Jarrett, Gernot Blume titled a chapter "Alien in the World of Classical Music."

The dialectical impetus of Jarrett's freedom corresponds to its opposite pole – strict adherence to technical rules of composition, as epitomized by the two volumes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. It is perhaps not entirely reckless to assume that in each case Jarrett was striving for “the Absolute,” better said, for its expression within a free order or an ordered freedom. To “sing” at the piano with unselfconscious spontaneity, and to render a strict Bach fugue faithfully are therefore two different, equally valid and perhaps even – *sub specie aeternitatis* – identical sides of the *Absolute*.⁸³

Jarrett's opinions on the pitfalls of interpretation apply with just as much relevance, of course, to modern jazz and the neo-conservative movement. When asked by pianist/interviewer Ted Rosenthal to justify why Jarrett didn't think it was proper for a young piano player to want to learn how to play jazz piano “just like Bud Powell,” Jarrett compared playing Powell to playing Mozart.

Bud Powell didn't write something down to the detailed extent that it could be delivered intact to a future generation. What the emulation has to be, for that to continue, is to somehow understand what in life would bring up such an intensity. So with Mozart, while it helps immensely if a player can do that – because of how intense he must have been – it's not a mandatory thing. It is mandatory with Bud. You can't take Bud with you, but you can take Mozart with you. I'm not following in the footsteps of Mozart by playing Mozart.⁸⁴

Christopher Hogwood's “mouthpiece” description of Jarrett's classical playing (p. 32) is an accurate metaphor. In Jarrett's mind, performers who impose their own individual “interpretations” on classical music, music that already exists on paper and that was most likely written many years prior to the performance, are robbing this music of its essence. Of Bach's music, for instance, Jarrett has said, “This music

⁸³ Liner notes to Jarrett's recording of the Shostakovich *24 Preludes and Fugues* (ECM 1469/70, 1992 (trans. by Maria Pelikan).

⁸⁴ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 9.

does not *need* my assistance.”⁸⁵ This ever-present temptation to “color” musical interpretations with emotion and feeling, which in terms of piano performance is perhaps most associated with Romantic music, is what Jarrett desperately attempts to avoid in his classical playing.

In the liner notes to Jarrett’s *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I* (his classical recording debut), writer Wolfgang Sandner quotes from the composer Ernst Bloch:

Unfortunately, feelings – to which we are so much attached – adhere also to the music which is entirely innocent of them, our privately colored pictures or hackneyed phrases which pretend to interpret the music only succeed in painting it over. Endless discussions grope for meaning and explain nothing.⁸⁶

Jarrett’s reluctance to impose “individual interpretations” on classical works stems partially from his feeling that adding external touches to these pieces might in fact subtract from their beauty.

You don’t have to be emphatic when you’re doing something beautiful. You do not have to emphasize the beauty of a thing. If you emphasize the beauty of something, you might step on it. Here, I’d like to show you these flowers – no, no, you’re not in the right – you have to come closer... no that’s too close. You just *stepped* on these flowers.⁸⁷

Jarrett seems to find expressive value in the very mathematical precision of Bach’s contrapuntal writing. He also suggests that those who are not in touch with the

⁸⁵ Liner notes to Jarrett’s recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I* (ECM New Series 1362/63, 1988), translated by Rolfe Heron.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Keith Jarrett, transcribed from recorded ECM promotional CD interview with Timothy Hill, my italics.

“consciousness” of Bach’s compositional process and therefore feel that they should “add” something to Bach’s music, are guilty of self-indulgence.

The melodic lines themselves are expressive to me... In most of what I have heard in the interpretation of other pianists, I feel that too much is imposed on the music. The very direction of the lines, the moving lines of notes are inherently expressive. Without the consciousness of what those lines really represent, one may feel that it needs an expressive addition.

The way the notes of a fugue follow each other cannot be predicted. But they have to follow certain laws. If you add something to make the fugue *more valuable*, you destroy those laws. When I play Bach, I do not hear the music, I hear almost the process of thought. Any coloration has nothing to do with this process, one contributes only one’s emotions. That may sound quite nice for a moment, but then the entire thought is gone.

If I play music which is composed for a rather limited instrument like the harpsichord on the piano, I have to tell myself that the piano should not go beyond a certain limit of expression. And a piano version should not be played with this intention: “Look here what the piano can do for this piece.” *The piece is better than the piano.*⁸⁸

Other modern interpretations of classical music

Jarrett’s views on interpretation bring up the tricky issue of “intentionality” in music: can modern performers ever know what a composer’s “intent” actually was, if indeed the composer ever had one? And is this knowledge even desirable, or necessary? If not, do modern performers have the “right” to do whatever they want with classical music, to interpret music written in, say, 1700, with “contemporary” phrasing? Of course, no one right answer exists; Jarrett’s stoic, reverential attitude toward classical playing represents only one perspective.

In contrast to Jarrett, quite a few other jazz performers have recently treated classical music as raw material, freely interpreting this music in a modern jazz context. On his 2001 recording *A Fine Line: Arias and Lieder*, jazz clarinetist Don Byron performs “updated” versions of Schumann and Puccini. Pianist Uri Caine released an acclaimed jazz version of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* in 2000, as well as two albums of the music of Gustav Mahler, all featuring his collaborations of “downtown” avant-garde musicians and DJs. Keith Jarrett’s approach to classical music couldn’t be further removed from these types of projects. Jarrett is nothing if not incredibly respectful for what at least *he* sees as the original “intentions” of this music. It seems then, perhaps surprisingly, that his positions fall in line with those who advocate “authentic” performance practice, even as he ponders the utter impossibility of ever achieving this goal.

Classical composers as improvisers

An additional link between Jarrett’s aesthetics and classical music exists in the fact that much of what is now known as classical music contained improvisation at the time of its initial creation. Bach, Beethoven, Handel, and Mozart are the four composers Jarrett has most heavily focused his own energies on, and not coincidentally, these same figures were the great improvising keyboard masters of their own times. Over time, the impulse for and even expectation of improvisation in classical music faded, and with very few exceptions, the artists traditionally recognized as the greatest “interpreters” of classical music have not been improvisers. As perhaps the foremost keyboard improviser working in today’s vernacular, Keith

⁸⁸ Liner notes to Jarrett’s recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I* (ECM 1362/63, 1988).

Jarrett is at least somewhat drawn to the music of these four masters *because* of their relationship to improvisation:

I think the music is better because their relationship to improvising was so strong. I wouldn't say I like their music because they were all improvisers, but there was something in their music, and I would say it is the ecstatic knowledge that comes through in Bach's music and Beethoven's music. It is the knowledge of the ecstatic state... this is what I give back to all the composers I play, who I believe were familiar with that state. Within their own language I might be able to give them just a little gift of having understood how tremendous their struggle was with a particular note.⁸⁹

Jarrett insists that Handel's keyboard music is deserving of more attention, and he speculates on the relative anonymity of much of this music:

I think there are a few reasons for this, but none of them legitimate. One is that we think of Handel as an orchestral, choral, or chamber ensemble writer. Another, is that because of his popularity in the "big scale" works, it's hard to hear the quality of the solo pieces. A third reason is that these solo pieces are, in general, non-dramatic and non-virtuosic.⁹⁰

Non-virtuosity as virtue

It is worth noting that Jarrett's musicality, although equal to the technical level of any of his peers, is emphatically not based upon instrumental virtuosity. The obsession with technically demanding, instrumental showpieces is a familiar element of classical music, and with the possible exception of the violin, repertoire for the piano boasts perhaps the largest literature of this sort. Indeed, the most famous classical pianists – one thinks of Horowitz, Van Cliburn, even Franz Liszt – have been renowned as much for their technical prowess as for their musicality. However, as

⁸⁹ Carr, 151.

⁹⁰ Liner notes to Jarrett's recording of the Handel *Suites for Keyboard* (1993).

Hogwood mentions, Jarrett seems to shy away from displaying any grand gestures of the self-consciously virtuosic or even “pianistic” sort. For example, though Jarrett’s technique is certainly up to the challenge, it is difficult to imagine him taking on the piano music of Liszt or Rachmaninov, composers of music prized by pianists at least in part for its potential for displaying virtuosity. Jarrett has made comments regarding his hesitancy to perform the music of Frederic Chopin, another hero of the Romantic piano.

I have a closeness to early and modern times, but not so much to that central period [of 19th century piano music.] Then again, the answer is that I never plan. So it could be that tomorrow I’ll decide to get out, for example, some Chopin that I had gotten out two years ago – only this times it clicks for me.⁹¹

In jazz terms, this reluctance to rely on easy virtuosity has manifested itself in Jarrett’s playing as a re-focusing on “non-virtuosic” musical elements such as listening (which, though not commonly recognized as such, is a musical element just as important as any other), pianistic touch and creating forward musical motion. Jarrett’s 1999 release *The Melody At Night, With You*, startling in its simplicity, provides perhaps the best example of his rejection of virtuosity. Regarding this recording, *Stereophile* reviewer Richard Lehnert remarked, “It is remarkable to hear someone with chops as awesome as Jarrett’s so consistently *not* use them.”⁹²

⁹¹ Keith Jarrett, “FI Interview: Keith Jarrett,” interview by Larry Alan Kay, *FI*, October 1996, 36.

⁹² Richard Lehnert, *Stereophile*, February 2000.

Improvising in historical context

The well-respected pianist and scholar Robert Levin is one of the very few modern classical musicians who improvises, specifically, improvised cadenzas for Mozart piano concertos in concert and recordings. I once asked Levin at a seminar what he thought of Jarrett's improvisations – he responded enthusiastically regarding Jarrett's musical ability, but took Jarrett to task for not attempting to improvise in historical style. In Jarrett's view, "There's a very simple answer to that. I don't improvise in historical context."⁹³ What further complicates the issue, however, is that Jarrett has recorded numerous improvisations that "sound like" historical models – for instance, portions of his 1986 double-album *Book of Ways*, recorded on clavichord, could very easily be mistaken for music from the Baroque era. The opening of Jarrett's 1988 *Paris Concert* sounds uncannily like a Bach prelude, and portions of his 1991 *Vienna Concert* are reminiscent of Shostakovich. Perhaps not coincidentally, Jarrett was recording works by these two composers around the same time as these concerts. However, Jarrett claims that, rather than making the self-conscious attempt to improvise historically, it is actually the "sound" of a particular instrument that leads him to play in a certain manner that might be construed as "classical." Jarrett sees a marked difference between Levin's style of historical improvisation, within which very clear-cut stylistic boundaries exist, and improvising from his own center, which allows him to dip freely into and out of historically-influenced passages. When asked by Ted Rosenthal about the "classical" sound of *Book of Ways*, Jarrett responded,

⁹³ Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 3.

“When *sound* takes me there, then it’s not ‘improvising in a style’ to me. It’s the sound and how it relates to what I’ve heard.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 3.

Chapter 8: Jarrett and Controversy

Overview

So many of Keith Jarrett's aesthetic positions are divisive and contentious. What makes Jarrett's pronouncements all the more difficult to swallow in some circles is that so much of what he has to say seems negative or dismissive, if not downright insulting. As a musician, Jarrett deals constantly, or at least attempts to deal, with the ineffable and transcendent. Therefore, when expressing himself through non-musical means, whether verbal or written, to some degree Jarrett is bound to reveal his incapacity to accurately mirror his musical expressions. Add to this mix Jarrett's patent mistrust of not only the musical world but seemingly the entirety of modern American society, and we are left with the image of Jarrett as a cranky outsider quixotically attempting to take down the system. John Rockwell's description of Jarrett's aesthetic, from *All-American Music*, seems germane:

[Jarrett's] mystical imagery is impervious to rational challenge. Jarrett has often been perceived as an egomaniac, but an equally likely interpretation is that he is a genuinely romantic artist misplaced in a cynically unromantic time – defensive, temperamental, uncomfortable with the way he expresses himself in words and convinced of his higher destiny.⁹⁵

The music industry

Keith Jarrett directs a good deal of his criticisms toward the music industry and its dependence on product: "Jazz is not a commodity, it's a process of self-discovery."⁹⁶ His *New York Times* article makes pointed reference to the over-commercialization of

⁹⁵ Rockwell, John: "Mystical Romanticism, Popularity and the Varied Forms of Fusion," *All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (Vintage: New York, 1983/R1997), 182.

modern society, especially in jazz – mocking what he sees as “young neo-psuedo-be-boppists fresh from the convention,” “nuevo-string-quartetists in Armani-wear,” and “Deadheads who succeed by calling themselves Deadheads.”⁹⁷ Jarrett rails against what he sees as a bloated and self-serving industry, ever eager to cash in on the next fad or fashion.

Listeners are swindled by the music industry’s insatiable need to stay alive no matter what the quality of the music. If it can find talented young players, the industry will tell them how great they are and give them lots of money to keep them satisfied (more correctly, buy off their souls, if they have any left). We must remember that music is not the music industry.

We need to be smart, as listeners and musicians. Let’s not allow self-appointed jazz experts to tell us what jazz is when we can hear in their music that they have no voice. Let’s not let the appearance of names and faces over and over in the media make us think that these are the forces in music at present. Let’s remember that music is not the music industry.⁹⁸

The entire music business in the West should be halted – just stop for a minute. We have killed so many things on the earth. We have destroyed nature, and we have all kinds of pollutants in the art of sound. I’m afraid we’ll destroy it too.⁹⁹

Technology

Jarrett has criticized the infiltration of modern technology, which he seems to equate with self-consciousness, into what he considers the realm of musical purity. Oddly, Jarrett couches this criticism in explicitly “moral” terms, as if artists who exploit technological innovations (electricity), are somehow sinning against the natural order of the world.

⁹⁶ Gernot Blume, “Musical Practices and Identity Construction in the Work of Keith Jarrett,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1998), 221.

⁹⁷ Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

⁹⁸ Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

⁹⁹ Jarrett to Umbach, quoted in Blume, 225.

Moral considerations: I am, and have been, carrying on an anti-electric music crusade of which this is an exhibit for the prosecution. Electricity goes through all of us and is not to be relegated to wires.¹⁰⁰

You have to leave something to become an electric player – like your skin or your heart. With acoustic piano there's so much more of a tactile response, so much more life in it. There are so many different ways of touching the acoustic piano, getting different sounds out, that I can't imagine why anyone would leave it.¹⁰¹

Though he has released dozens of albums documenting his music-making process, Jarrett seems almost reluctant to allow for the validity of the recorded object. He claims that only actual presence at his concerts will accurately indicate the “event” to listeners. To Jarrett, listeners who don't see the physical pain and “ecstasy” that he endures are not experiencing the full spectrum of his art.

What I do doesn't transfer to CD. The sounds and the musical things get on it, but the flux, the chemical combination that comes alive in the room, isn't there. ... Most listeners are basing what they know on the CDs and the records, so they don't know how ferocious my concerts are... they can't see the motion of my hand, they can't see the shoulders, they can't see why I'm gasping for breath.¹⁰²

Keith Jarrett holds fast to a standard of “musical purity,” one that involves exclusively acoustic instruments. In this sense, Jarrett displays a decidedly Romantic, idealistic streak that stands at odds with the modern reliance on all things

¹⁰⁰ Liner notes to *Bremen/Lausanne* (ECM 1035/37, 1973).

¹⁰¹ Keith Jarrett, “Interview with Keith Jarrett,” interview by David Rubien, *Salon.com*, 4 December 2000, accessed on 8 June 2004, available at <http://archive.salon.com/people/conv/2000/12/04/jarrett/print.html>.

¹⁰² Keith Jarrett, “A Maverick Pianist Answers Back,” interview with Neil Strauss, *New York Times*, 9 March 1995.

technological. Jarrett frequently lambastes the current industry trend to create increasingly fancy instruments, an over-dependence on gadgetry in music-making, and not surprisingly, what he sees as the primarily economic interests that provide an undercurrent for new technology

What is this compulsion we have to take every new idea as far as we can? Are we confusing an habitually destructive compulsion with a “desire for the truth?” (Science?) In the music world, this fixation has brought about more un-needed instruments than the whole of history up until modern times. The music never demanded them (or needed them.) They are the result of a compulsion gone wild (coupled with the desire to make money *above all else*). We must, it seems, do what comes next. And when the next becomes a reality we claim it is valid because it exists. Are we so proud of our human genius for invention that we forget the human gift of self-questioning? Consciousness includes *moral* choices (and why does the word “moral” immediately bother so many people?) Perhaps the same reason “guilt” does?¹⁰³

Unlike so many of his peers who came out of the free-wheeling 1970s jazz-rock scene – Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea the most obvious examples – Jarrett has consistently railed against what he deems “unnatural” electronic instruments.

I have this funny vision of people pulling electric keyboards away from keyboard players while they’re playing and putting different ones in front of them; they all feel the same and the last one is a typewriter but they’re so into it they don’t know it’s a typewriter.¹⁰⁴

We don’t need to hear who is more clever with synthesizers. Our cleverness has created the world we live in, which in many ways we’re sorry about.¹⁰⁵

It was clear to me that the moment I touched an electric piano, that it was a toy, not a real instrument. Even when I played electric piano with Miles Davis, my brain was trying to say it was OK, even though it wasn’t, and that could have been like a toxin working on my body.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Liner notes to *Changeless* (ECM 1392, 1989).

¹⁰⁴ Keith Jarrett, “In Search of Folk Roots,” 111.

¹⁰⁵ Keith Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

Jarrett discusses his visceral reaction to having to deal with electrified instruments while performing alongside fusion guitarist Larry Coryell in Milwaukee, 1974.

When you're up against an electric band like that, it's like you're on two separate planets. We wanted to make use of air, and they were using wires. It's like a toxic exercise. I actually get a metallic taste in my mouth when I think about electric music. That's why I don't like recording studios – except my own, which is just a little room above the garage. I can't even tolerate my own playing on electric keyboards. It's not about the musical ideas – the sound itself is toxic. It's like eating plastic broccoli.

However, Jarrett does backtrack from maintaining this position in overt philosophical terms, as he acknowledges that his love for acoustic instruments simply hinges on personal preference: “I don't have philosophical problems with any of it [electronic music.] It really is a physiological irritation, as if someone were smoking next to me.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Keith Jarrett, “Whisper Not,” interview by Marius Nordan, *JazzTimes*, January/February 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Doerschuk, 100, as quoted in Blume, 263.

Chapter 9: Jarrett's Musical Values

The “natural” and process

As Jarrett places value on “organic” music making, he also holds up “the natural” as an ideal. In defending this perspective, Jarrett frequently turns to folk and “ethnic” music, where he recognizes a more urgent “need” for making music.

Try to imagine the first musician. He was not playing for an audience, or a market, or working on his next recording, or touring with his show, or working on his image. He was playing out of need, out of his need for the music.¹⁰⁸

How is it that native tribal peoples of all countries “knew” everything to be interconnected and fragile? It seems that, because they were a part of their world (not egoistically, at all), they shared the knowledge of that world. But that was not enough: they assumed everything was alive and conscious, and therefore connected, whereas we consider everything dead and disposable unless proven otherwise.¹⁰⁹

Perhaps because he is an improviser, to whom the notion of “process” determines practically everything, Jarrett praises process-based, organic music over objectified “results.”

We live in an age in which only results seem to count, not process. A world of objects and productions, a visual culture of images, television, speechwriters, a culture that thinks it can create security with insurance, lawyers and banks. But life is liquid, not solid; a process, not a result; the present, not the future.¹¹⁰

Regarding his improvised solo album *Vienna Concert*, Jarrett again speaks of his desire to get away from perceiving music as an “object.”

¹⁰⁸ Keith Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

¹⁰⁹ Liner notes for *Changeless*.

As an object it's not my favorite one. But the solo things all along have been [intended] to get away from making an object. So as that, it is the only successful concert on CD or record. In the purest sense *I have created the lack of an object. You hear the process and if you can't get into the process, it's nothing.*¹¹¹

Jarrett romanticizes the purity of nature, equating the process of musical improvisation to the random, unpredictable beauty of nature itself. Jarrett also implies that the physical phenomenon of "sound" can have natural or unnatural properties: "People who see monotony in Nature will see monotony in true improvisation. They will not see the process and they will bring their own monotony-of-vision with them."¹¹²

With this line of thought, Jarrett seems to share commonalities with the influential American composer and naturalist John Cage, who famously said, "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all."¹¹³ In fact, Cage offers an interesting parallel to Jarrett not only in terms of his valuation of nature, but also in his relentlessly stubborn individuality, and his stated desire to eliminate ego from musical creation. This is not to say, however, that Jarrett is directly influenced by Cage's aesthetics; I would hazard to say that Jarrett would most likely find Cage's aesthetics too self-conscious and far removed from *actual* musical creation and

¹¹⁰ Keith Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty," Sec. H, p.19.

¹¹¹ Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 8, my italics.

¹¹² Liner notes for *Concerts, Bregenz/Munich* (ECM 1228, 1981).

¹¹³ Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Wesleyan, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

process to be appealing.

Jarrett's aesthetic valuation of "naturalness" prizes not only the purity of sound, but also a certain brand of (what he sees as) "genuine" human interaction. As an improviser, Jarrett is particularly keyed into the communicative process, and sees any artificial reenactment of true musical communication (i.e., through studio trickery or electronic manipulation) as a bastardization of organic, "liquid" music making. Jarrett has likened the act of turning on music in a room to someone saying "let's color the air in this room dark green,"¹¹⁴ and he frequently speaks of music in terms of its possessing nutritional value: "Music has nutritional value, and without artists who need the music (and therefore "have a voice"), there will be no value in it."¹¹⁵

Penchant for attracting paradox

Noticeably at play in Jarrett's aesthetic stance is a rigid denial of the commercial marketplace as possible ground for artistic fertility and spiritual connection. What seems most paradoxical in this dynamic, of course, is that Jarrett is a commodity himself; his records consistently sell substantially more than the records of most other jazz artists. What's more, Jarrett's own brand of what Gernot Blume calls "spiritually rooted anti-commercialism" might be criticized by some as containing some of the very same tendencies for fetishization and commodification that Jarrett rails against. Even the aesthetic presentation of his albums suggests a rigid (some say pretentious) austerity inspired by the ethos of the ECM label. Indeed, during the 1970s, ECM

¹¹⁴ Keith Jarrett, "Interview with Keith Jarrett."

¹¹⁵ Keith Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty," Sec. H, p.19.

marketed itself with the phrase “the most beautiful sound next to silence,”¹¹⁶ and the marketing of Jarrett’s albums casts Jarrett as a supremely individual artiste.

Jarrett seems to have a penchant for unloading contentious, argumentative positions on the public, and then scurrying away to the safety of his bunker. For someone who in fact spends a good deal of his time “talking about music” in the form of published writings and interviews, the following statements by Jarrett, given during the same interview (!), may seem rather contradictory.

I think we spend a lot more time talking about art than is healthy. Recently, my attitude has been “Show me the music.” That’s where the test really lies.¹¹⁷

If a musician decides to speak, then he’s a spokesman. I got tired of it, because I don’t feel the need to confront issues every time out.¹¹⁸

Perhaps Jarrett doesn’t realize (or, more likely, doesn’t care) just how confrontational his positions appear. What is strange, however, is the way that Jarrett seems to deny his own tendency to speak out about things that concern him. Jarrett’s self-image is probably nowhere near as contentious and “ego-driven,” as most see him.

To me, as much as I’m considered to have a problem with ego, I think it’s often mistaken. I think the real ego problems are from people who think they know what they’re saying when they are saying something else.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ From ECM promotional insert to Jarrett’s 1977 album *Staircase*; phrase first coined by Canada’s *Coda* magazine, reviewing early ECM discs, in 1971.

¹¹⁷ Keith Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 41.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 42.

¹¹⁹ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 11.

Yet perhaps this phenomenon only underscores Jarrett's strikingly original place in the musical world – when the system is all we know, Jarrett would most likely say that it is impossible *not* to seem divisive. Recalling his *New York Times* piece, Jarrett said:

It is impossible to address the jazz category directly without seeming divisive, since the media are saturated with only a few names, names of musicians who seem to have taken over jazz. This is only a media reality; it has nothing to do with the music. Unless radio, television, and newspapers stop falling over like dominoes, happy to have a “marketable” story, we will see two separate cultures: the popular culture and the underground culture (the underground for the music, the popular for the hype.)¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Keith Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p. 19.

Chapter 10: Individuality/Finding A Voice

Individuality in jazz

Perhaps the most frequent criticism that Jarrett directs toward modern music is what he considers to be a lack of individual voices in music. The importance of the individual creator in jazz history cannot be understated, especially with regard to innovation. Jazz composer and scholar Gunther Schuller comments on this:

Jazz is, unlike many other musical traditions, both European and ethnic/non-Western, a music based on the free unfettered expression of the individual. This... is perhaps the most radical and important aspect of jazz, and which differentiates it so dramatically from other forms of music making on the globe.¹²¹

Marking the difference between jazz and classical music aesthetics, Schuller continues:

Individualism is not only not sought after in classical music, but actually repressed and frowned upon. There the performing practices center on rendering, in a more or less predetermined sound and style, an already existing composition, rather than extemporaneously creating one in a highly personalized way.¹²²

This provides a good context for Jarrett's statements on individuality, of which there are many. In contrast to the afore-mentioned "conservatory" approach to making jazz, Jarrett does not value the idolization of any "musical hero," outside of perhaps *himself*. Often, young jazz musicians learn how to play by playing along with recordings of historical jazz musicians. For example, trumpet players tend to worship

¹²¹ Gunther Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller*. Da Capo, 1999, 27.

¹²² Ibid, 31.

Clifford Brown's playing, while for saxophonists, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane are venerated. Of course, Jarrett was deeply influenced by his early teachers, as well as jazz pianists like Ahmad Jamal, Paul Bley, and especially Bill Evans, but the point is that Jarrett *left* these figures a long time ago. This is exactly what *all* of the greatest musicians in jazz history have done – indeed, if John Coltrane had focused only on “becoming” Charlie Parker, we would never have had Coltrane's contributions.

Jarrett comments regarding this dynamic:

If I thought to play like Coltrane would be my goal, then I'm wrong. If I thought to play like anybody was my goal, then it's wrong in jazz. Because the whole survival of jazz depends on there being people who aren't playing like anybody else. It would be like someone saying “This is my favorite poet, therefore, I would like to write their poetry.”¹²³

Jarrett goes on to quote (famously) from the 17th century Japanese poet Basho: “Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise: Seek what they sought.”

Not surprisingly, all of Jarrett's admitted musical heroes adhere to his aesthetic of individuality. All of these musicians are iconoclastic in some way, and Jarrett's aesthetic (at least partially) borrows elements from all. From the jazz world, Jarrett has praised the organicism of controversial saxophonist Ornette Coleman (“Please listen to Ornette, guys! There is natural intelligence and nutrition.”¹²⁴), the spiritual questing of John Coltrane, the “un-self-consciousness” of Miles Davis, and the individualistic pianists Jamal, Bley, Evans, Lennie Tristano, Bud Powell, and Jaki Byard. Interestingly, Jarrett claims to have derived influence from the individual

¹²³ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity of doing more than on (musical) thing,” 10.

¹²⁴ Keith Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

approaches of saxophonists: “Saxophone players in particular have influenced me, not pianists.”¹²⁵

To Jarrett, jazz is nothing without individuality, and he laments the loss of individualistic voices in contemporary jazz:

Music isn’t categories or technology. It isn’t the result or an image or a theory. It’s not productions or records. It’s not even talent... It is the individual voice, present to itself, that needs to be heard.¹²⁶

Jazz at its best signifies the vitality of the *individual*. If I look around and say “what’s missing now that was around in the 60s?” – I think I could say that the vitality of the individual is missing... Individuals still exist, but the news is now focusing away from anything to do with that. Everything’s either money or marketing or economy, that’s it.¹²⁷

There’s very little *individual* music happening right now. I’m hearing information when I hear those guys play. They’re well informed about styles, but they’re so close they’re far away. It’s the idea that the way to get to jazz is to investigate the styles, and now that we know all that, what do we know? Nothing.¹²⁸

Of course, the conservatory approach to learning jazz, which trains young musicians to be eclectic and versatile, springs directly from economics: jazz players earning college degrees, like classical players, want to be able to market themselves and make a living playing music. In today’s music world, there are countless opportunities for young musicians to freelance for “club dates” and wedding jobs, and it’s only natural that well-rounded musicianship should include familiarity with different styles of music. Jarrett is of course in the enviable place of having already made his fame and

¹²⁵ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 5.

¹²⁶ Keith Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty,” Sec. H, p.19.

¹²⁷ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 9.

fortune through music – he won't ever have to “scrap for gigs.” Jarrett however criticizes the common approach to learning jazz primarily as a repository of styles: “You’ve got a guy who can play 60 different styles in 10 minutes, but how much music is he making?”¹²⁹

Complicating his criticisms is that fact that Jarrett himself is familiar with as much jazz history, or more, than most other jazz players, and without this knowledge, much of his music would be unimaginable. In fact, Jarrett’s stylistic conjurations often seem to reflect T.S. Eliot’s oft-repeated artistic credo: “great artists don’t borrow, they steal!” Yet Jarrett’s stylistic syntheses, which often fuse together elements from ragtime, blues, gospel, boogie-woogie, bebop, avant-garde and free jazz, remain *his*, all within a level of artistry and command that most “style” imitators cannot reach. Jarrett biographer Ian Carr comments on this:

There is a difference between having a wide knowledge of diverse musics and using what you require of them in making your own music, and being eclectic. A musician who is eclectic is a person who is all circumference and no center, a repository of music not his own.¹³⁰

Lincoln Center/Wynton Marsalis

Due to many factors including his insistence on musical exploration, his valuation of free jazz, his uneasy relationship with marketing, and probably most for his outright dismissal of Marsalis in writings and interviews, Keith Jarrett is seen by many as the “anti-Wynton Marsalis.” The debate over neo-conservatism stands as a colossal issue

¹²⁸ Keith Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 42.

¹²⁹ Keith Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 42.

in jazz during the past twenty years, and is too broad to tackle here, suffice to say that Jarrett's aesthetics appear diametrically opposed to Marsalis's (and Ken Burns's, by default) revisionist history. Ken Burns, who by his own admission owned two jazz CDs prior to making his widely publicized, and for many definitive, 2000 documentary *Jazz*, drew almost exclusively upon the testimony of Marsalis and poet Stanley Crouch. Keith Jarrett, by practically any accounts one of the most important and influential jazz musicians of the past 30 years, is barely mentioned in the film, and nowhere does his music appear on the 5-CD compilation set. Writer William Berling comments on Burns's project:

It's clear from the tight-assed perspective of *Jazz* that trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the "senior creative consultant" on the project, is the real intellectual force behind the film....Mr. Marsalis, who is also the creative director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, has long made it clear where his affections lie. It's "yes" to Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and "no" to post-60's jazz. ... His traditional programs seek to establish a jazz canon, to make jazz a classical music. ... Jazz lives, but you wouldn't know it from this film.¹³¹

Regarding Marsalis the musician, Jarrett has offered the following criticism:

I haven't heard him swing. Or play the blues. Or play music, really. There a point where it's up to history, but if the jazz world is saying this is good, accepting this, we're creating a new generation of people who are not really listening.¹³²

Jarrett contentiously discusses what he considers to be Marsalis's lack of individuality.

¹³⁰ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 34.

¹³¹ William Berling. "Burns' *Jazz* Doesn't Swing," *The New York Observer*, January 15, 2001.

¹³² Andrew Solomon, "The Jazz Martyr," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 February 1997, p. 35.

I've never heard anything Wynton played sound like it meant anything at all. Wynton has no voice and no presence. His music sounds like a talented high-school trumpet player to me. He plays things really, really badly that you cannot screw up unless you are a bad player... And for a great black player who talks about the blues – I've never heard Wynton play the blues convincingly, and I'd challenge him to a blues standoff any time. *He's jazzy the way someone who drives a BMW is sporty.*¹³³

Jarrett's criticisms of Marsalis fall squarely in line with his cynical attitude toward the state of modern music. Outside of the jazz world, Wynton Marsalis is generally perceived to be the most important, greatest American jazz musician, and it is easy to wonder whether Jarrett envies his position. What is more likely, however, is that Jarrett genuinely feels that others (including himself, presumably) are far more deserving of this title. Remarkably, in a 1996 piece for *Musician* magazine, Jarrett rattles off a list of 125 (!) important jazz musicians from the 1960s, the time when he himself was learning the music. Jarrett follows this with the following comment relating to Marsalis's ascent to authority: "I would guess that about 30 of these names could have claimed ascendancy to the jazz throne more legitimately than Wynton Marsalis."¹³⁴ Writer Gerald Early discusses Jarrett's frustration with Marsalis's role as "media darling," touching upon the sensitive issue of racial politics in jazz.

One's immediate response to Jarrett's remarks was that he was jealous because Marsalis had achieved the fame Jarrett felt he himself deserved and, worse still, that he believed Marsalis had acquired this acclaim largely because he is black and the public, both black and white, demands a black musician to be the authenticator of jazz. This reduces Jarrett to being the equivalent of a disgruntled white man who is upset because he believes some prominent black is where he is because of affirmative action, not merit. His remarks about Marsalis grow from his general disappointment with the current jazz scene, which Marsalis symbolizes

¹³³ Andrew Solomon, "The Jazz Martyr," 35, my italics.

¹³⁴ Keith Jarrett, *Musician*, 1996.

more than anyone else and which seems to be producing, to Jarrett's mind, little vital music.¹³⁵

Jarrett's "outsider-ness"

A distinct "rebel" nature and the challenging of easy assumptions are qualities that have marked Keith Jarrett's aesthetics from the beginning of his career. At the age of 16, Jarrett turned down an opportunity to study in Paris with the great teacher Nadia Boulanger, mentor to so many important American composers including Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, and Philip Glass. In Jarrett's words, "It wasn't a casual 'No.' I was developing a way with music that was better off minus the labels on everything, minus the descriptions, minus the analysis."¹³⁶ Jarrett was kicked out of Boston's Berklee College of Music in 1964 for "playing on the inside of the piano," among other serious musical transgressions. In Jarrett's words, "Mostly, I learned that this kind of training was not for me. But I was 18 and at least it got me out of Allentown."¹³⁷

Keith Jarrett's firebrand artistic personality contains so many elements of what might be called a distinctly "American" individualism. Gernot Blume comments on this facet of Jarrett: "[His] outsidersness seems to be one of the few unchanging axioms of his own identity construction. Whatever Jarrett does, it is, by his own emphasis, radically different from the mainstream. This assertion of marginality... has become

¹³⁵ Gerald Early, *White Noise and White Knights: Some Thoughts on Race, Jazz and the White Jazz Musician*, as quoted from <http://www.thecityreview.com/jazz.html>, accessed on 8 June 2004.

¹³⁶ Walsh, "Growing Into the Silence."

¹³⁷ Liner notes to *Somewhere Before* (Atlantic 8808-2, 1968).

a central aspect of his art.”¹³⁸ John Rockwell discusses Jarrett’s status as outsider:
“His concentration on the beyond and his defensive isolation have cut him off from the musical currents of his time, be they classical, jazz, or popular.”¹³⁹

Jarrett is quite aware of his distance from the mainstream; in fact he seems to embrace it, claiming “There’s one thing that I know well – that I feel very alone. It’s the price you have to pay if you want to be yourself. And I don’t believe that I suffer for it, but it seems to me that I have nothing to say to the majority of people.”¹⁴⁰

Jarrett also seems aware of the distinctly non-rational, obscure, even impenetrable nature of much of his aesthetic, saying, “I’m very much alone in terms of my relationship to music. I don’t know anybody who knows what I’m talking about if I talk long enough.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Blume, 3.

¹³⁹ Rockwell, 183.

¹⁴⁰ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 48.

¹⁴¹ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 141.

Chapter 11: Jarrett's Relationship to Transcendentalism

Background

An intriguing link may be made between the aesthetics of Keith Jarrett and American philosophical history. Of course, much of what Jarrett has to say about individualism has been said before. However, an immediate link might be made between Jarrett's aesthetics and certain writings of the American Transcendentalists, especially those of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Even the writing of Walt Whitman, in its turbulent narratives of a broadly-defined America, shares something with Jarrett's all-encompassing dynamism. One could easily imagine Jarrett stating something along the lines of Whitman's famous quote from *Song of Myself*, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

Transcendentalist scholar Barbara MacKinnon has articulated these three themes as central tenets of Transcendentalist thought:

- 1) the divinity of nature
- 2) the worth of the individual person
- 3) the capacity of each person to know the truth directly¹⁴²

Keith Jarrett has addressed all three of these issues in his writings. Whether Jarrett himself is familiar with the complete lineage of Transcendentalist thought is not

¹⁴² Jan Swafford. *Charles Ives: A Life With Music* (W.W. Norton, 1996), 293.

important; the point is that Jarrett's artistic inclinations do not arise from a vacuum-state, his ideas are not new in this country.

Discontent with surrounding circumstances

In his 1992 article written for the New York Times, Jarrett references what is perhaps the classic text on individual voice, Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-Reliance:

This is a good place to mention that "Do your own thing" came from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who actually said, "Do your thing, and I shall know you."¹⁴³ In other words, you reveal yourself to others through what you do. Emerson's statement was not meant to be a kind of carte blanche to follow our shallowest whims: It's not about lifestyle or fashion or casual choices. It contains a warning: I will only recognize you if you have your voice; I will not recognize you otherwise.¹⁴⁴

Jarrett seems intent on excluding all contemporary music that does not live up to his standard of individual voice. Jarrett is notorious for doling out far more negative than positive criticism regarding the state of modern music making, and this spirit of perpetual discontent with surrounding circumstances falls directly in the spirit of American individualism.

Anti-materialism/emphasis on nature

Transcendentalist writers like Thoreau placed great emphasis on establishing what might be deemed a spiritual connection to nature, while renouncing an increasingly material, product-driven society. The timing of this anti-materialistic impulse, coming in the 1830s, foreshadowed by a few dozen years the beginning of the

¹⁴³ In fact, Jarrett misquotes Emerson here; the original statement, taken from Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, is "Do your *work* and I shall know you." (Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty," Sec. H, p.19.)

Industrial Revolution, in which America's sense of self-worth became increasingly linked to an ever-expanding commercial economy. Thoreau in particular lamented the coming of an age in which machines and new technologies would supplant essential human interaction and communication. In addition, Thoreau frequently chastised the burgeoning American tendency for superfluous communication, for idle chatter when there is no outright need for it. This attitude provides a marked contrast with today's "information superhighway," and Keith Jarrett's writings echo Thoreau's concern, lamenting the loss of silence perhaps found in less "technological" times. Jarrett's keenly exhilarative, exhaustive musical questing often seems almost directly scripted from Transcendental philosophy. In his cross-stylistic musical samplings, in his denial of the commercial and the material, and most noticeably in his readily acknowledged lusting after musical Deity, the aesthetics and musical practices of Keith Jarrett stand firmly within this tradition.

Not only Jarrett's writings, but interestingly, his lifestyle apart from music seems influenced by Transcendentalism. Regarding his own New Jersey farm, Jarrett has commented, "One reason I don't live in a population center is that I only need very few tiny clues to know what is going on. Keeping my own consciousness awake is a full-time job. I don't need to spend a lot of energy checking out other musicians and knowing what's 'in' or 'out.'"¹⁴⁵ Jarrett's estate has been described by interviewer Larry Alan Kay as "much closer to Thoreau's Walden Pond... than to Manhattan. It

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Keith Jarrett, "Sons of Miles."

was a place one could listen, intently and carefully, to the songs of birds, the buzz of insects, the flow of water in a stream – or to silence itself.”¹⁴⁶

Parallels to another American individualist: Charles Ives

Strictly in terms of American musical history, another significant connection exists between Transcendentalism and the aesthetics of Keith Jarrett, found in the person of Charles Ives. Though Ives’s aesthetic might on the surface appear to have little to do with jazz, Ives is the figure most frequently associated with American musical individualism, and Jarrett has referred to Ives as possessing the type of individual voice he seeks in his own music.¹⁴⁷ Ives’s connections to Emerson and other Transcendentalist writers are well documented; his Concord Sonata includes movements named for Emerson and Thoreau. In terms of musical comparisons between Jarrett and Ives, critic John Rockwell describes Jarrett’s music in terms that could very easily be applied to Ives’s freely-borrowing sound collages.

The effect is of a shifting prism of idioms, few of them less than fifty years old and hence a kind of dream museum of the interchanges between jazz, blues, gospel, old-time pop, hymns and classical music that marked the early days of jazz itself.¹⁴⁸

Jarrett and Ives share a similar propensity for providing written statements supporting their music; in Ives’s case, this came in the form of *Essays Before a Sonata* and other published writings, in Jarrett’s case, these appear primarily through liner notes. In both cases, this impulse seems paradoxical, as both Ives’s and Jarrett’s aesthetic

¹⁴⁶ Keith Jarrett, “FI Interview.”

¹⁴⁷ Rockwell, 179.

¹⁴⁸ Rockwell, 179.

would seem to indicate that music shouldn't need explanation. This impulse toward non-musical intellectualism might simply be attributed to the fascination both men held for deeply investigating and reflecting upon the nature of musical creation, as well as their own processes as artists. Ives's writings on music, and in this case, Emerson, reveal a valuation of "process" quite similar to Jarrett's:

A devotion to an end tends to undervalue the means. A power of revelation may make one more concerned about his perception's of the soul's nature than the way of their disclosure. Emerson ... is a creator whose intensity is consumed more with the substance of his creation than with the manner by which he shows it to others.¹⁴⁹

In this passage, Ives places value on process in artistic creation, in opposition to a culture that focuses more attention on finished product. The very circumstances of Ives's musical creation bear poignant witness to this idea. For a certain period during his life, Ives himself was a man seemingly possessed by his muse. Yet the fact is that a good portion of his works ended up not in concert halls ("product"), but in his cabinet drawer, emphasizing in concrete form Ives's inclination toward process over results. Apart from the fact that he releases so many albums, Keith Jarrett's aesthetics follow this tradition. Given the ephemeral nature of improvisation, which seems in its very nature an art form based on process, this dynamic is even more important.

The following words from Jarrett underscore this:

We live in an age in which only results seem to count, not processes. An age of objects and productions, a visual culture of images, television, speechwriters; a culture that thinks it can create security with insurance, lawyers and banks. But life is liquid, not solid; a process, not a result; the present, not the future.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Charles Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata* (Norton, 1961), 121.

¹⁵⁰ Keith Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty," Sec. H, p.19.

Additionally, Jarrett's very style *as a writer* seems remarkably similar to that of Charles Ives. In *Essays for a Sonata*, Ives demonstrates his great love for the ellipsis, for the parenthetical statement, for a stream-of-consciousness, obtuse thought process that seems to mirror Jarrett's writing, not to mention Jarrett's unfiltered musical improvisations. The following rather rambling and obtuse discourse, written by Jarrett, could just as easily have come from Ives.

We live in pathetically discontinuous times and lead pathetically discontinuous lives, distanced from each activity by the previous, possibly unrelated, one, and scheduling the next activity simultaneously. In utter contrast, tribal peoples' activities are a part of (and are determined by) the natural environment that nourished them. Theirs is a continuum of *connected actions limited by their care* for the life of their world. We are all, in the end, limited by our care. This limit is morality. If this care comes from inside us, it is conscious. If it comes from outside, we are at the disposal of scientific method (in this society). We know no such limits when we proclaim our freedom to do as we please (to do the next thing), and the lack of consciousness (perception) of what *our world* really is (its center) allows science to become our occupation.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Liner notes to *Changeless*.

Chapter 12: Spiritual Value of Music

Influence of Eastern thought/Gurdjieff

Jarrett finds inspiration in Eastern thought, having studied intensively the writings of the Armenian mystic philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff, as well as the popular philosopher Kahlil Gibran. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) was a traveling priest and physician who in an attempt to discover “universal truth,” drew on many traditions of esoteric spirituality. Gurdjieff wrote a good deal about the creative process, and thus, his aesthetics have appealed to artists. In the following excerpt from his book *Views From the Real World*, Gurdjieff expresses his valuation of process and artistic purpose:

For us art is not an aim but a means. Ancient art has a certain inner content. In the past, art served the same purpose as is served today by books – the purpose of preserving and transmitting certain knowledge. In ancient times they did not write books but expressed knowledge in works of art. ... For example, to understand a book written in English, it is necessary to know English. I am speaking not of fantasy but of mathematical, non-subjective art. A modern painter may believe in and feel his art, but you see it subjectively: one person likes it, another dislikes it. It is a case of feeling, of like and dislike. *But ancient art was not for liking.* Everyone who read understood. Now, this purpose of art is entirely forgotten.

A similar attitude regarding the purpose of artistic creation underscores much of Jarrett’s aesthetics. Jarrett values the potential for spiritual connection that music provides as much as any other factor, and he has made reference to the “tribal language” that his trio keeps alive. Jarrett echoes Gurdjieff in his liner notes to *Spirits*:

Art exists as a reminder. All true art is a reminder of forgotten, or soon-to-be-forgotten relationships, whether it be God and man, man and woman, earth and humanity.¹⁵²

If you were to recite a story that you learned from someone's voice speaking it to you, to me, there's more learning being done there than there is from learning it from the written word, and I think that goes for how I feel about music. Music is more than the notes, more than the spaces between the notes, and more than anything anybody can write on paper no matter what notation they use.¹⁵³

Influence of Transcendentalist Spirituality

Jarrett's afore-mentioned "the individual voice, present to itself" of course points directly to Transcendental philosophy, which held that the only method of reaching God was going through the deep process of an inner search. Emerson's Self-Reliance begins with the quote "Do not seek for things outside yourself." In Jarrett's case, it seems that this shamanistic quest for spiritual truth happens to find its manifestation in musical form. This aspect of Jarrett's aesthetic aligns him most closely with John Coltrane, who in the last years of his life was obsessed with reaching God through his music. Additional ties to this distinctly Emersonian sphere of "art as spiritual practice" are demonstrated in overt references to individuality and spirituality appearing not only in Jarrett's writings, but also song titles on recordings. (e.g., "Personal Mountains," "Ecstasy," and "Oasis.")

Sacredness of musical act

In a manner that seems remarkably out-of-fashion in modern technological times, Jarrett often feels the need to guard the sacredness of musical creation. Jarrett

¹⁵² Liner notes to *Spirits* (ECM 1333/34, 1986).

¹⁵³ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 66.

describes his own musical process more in terms of acute spiritual practice, eschewing the technical. The following quotes, when taken in the context of his massive and diverse musical output, shed light on Jarrett's spiritual intentions.

If I could call everything I did "Hymn," it would be appropriate because that's what they are when they're correct.¹⁵⁴

I used to tell my students, "You have to play like it's the last time you'll ever play. You have to feel like it means everything to you."¹⁵⁵

[My music reflects] a state of surrender to an ongoing harmony in the universe that exists with or without us.¹⁵⁶

To me, normal communication is mystical communication. The most effective communication between members of a band is not the kind of communication you can describe, so you would say that's mystical.¹⁵⁷

Creativity as spiritual impulse

Throughout his career, Jarrett has consistently described the act of creation in spiritual terms. In the liner notes to his 1973 triple album *Solo Concerts*, Jarrett articulates the following philosophy.

It is the process [of creativity] that motivates every human activity, from the Sunday Sermon to the Happy Hour at the local bar. If you know it [creativity] incredibly well you write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. If you refuse to even consider it, then cocktail hour may be your most important experience... Creativity is what makes humanity move (again whether they know it or not). We were Created to Participate.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Jarrett to Art Lange in *Down Beat*, June 1984; as quoted in Carr, 124.

¹⁵⁵ York, 2003.

¹⁵⁶ Liner notes to *Bridge of Light* (ECM New Series 1450, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 139.

Contained in the liner notes for Jarrett's 1986 recording *Spirits* is the following related statement:

Musicians can and do fool themselves every day when they say they are "making music." They mean they are playing their instrument very well. This can be done by computers. What computers cannot deal with is value: meaning.¹⁵⁹

More recently, Jarrett has spoken of the music he makes with the trio as "[a] spiritual involvement in something that is not our own... something beautiful that is not ours."¹⁶⁰ This statement serves to indicate the sort of Eastern-inspired renunciation of ego that Jarrett's aesthetic lays claim to, as does the following: "I thought someone could show that music wasn't about material. I wanted to say that we don't possess this, this isn't our music. If you own anything you're not free."¹⁶¹ Clearly, Jarrett's stated positions on creativity appear inscrutable, tangled and decidedly non-Western, and it is perhaps in this area that his individualistic, outsider status in modern music is most apparent.

Jarrett's physical transcendence

As an improviser whose music is so dependent on finding the flow of inspiration, Jarrett is particularly susceptible to the visceral influence of musical performance on his body. Jarrett is infamous for his theatrics at the piano, standing and swooning, humming along discordantly as he plays, contorting his body in pained ecstasy as the music channels through him.

¹⁵⁸ Liner notes to *Solo Concerts* (ECM 1035-37, 1973).

¹⁵⁹ Liner notes to *Spirits*.

¹⁶⁰ *DownBeat*, December 1995

The late journalist and author Frank Conroy comments on witnessing Jarrett listen to an excerpt from his own 1976 *Sun Bear Concerts*:

When he listens, he is swept away, and it is a sort of muted version of what happens to him when he plays. After every phrase he gives a sharp, reflexive exhalation of breath, as if he has lived through that phrase in the act of listening to it... The music, the phrases are a kind of breathing to him. When the lines get long he rocks back and forth, and dips his head, and then raises it as the line soars. The gestures are pressurized, and mysteriously eloquent. It is as if he is straining to physically become the music, to turn his body into sound.¹⁶²

Coming from his background in improvised music to the world of classical music, where a stylized demeanor and proper decorum are expected of performers, Jarrett found himself on unfamiliar turf. He quickly became frustrated by what he saw as the sterility and emptiness of this world, and lamented the fact that classical performers, at least in his experience, do not recognize the potential for transformative experience that music allows:

Their life [classical musicians] doesn't seem to change by virtue of what they play on stage. I've noticed that they are the same people when they leave the stage as they were when they went on. And they play the finale, and their hair shakes around a lot at the end because they're double fortissimo and everyone knows that it's the end and everyone is excited and applause happens.

In the classical circles I've been in, I could never commit to that 100% as a world. I couldn't live in it because the word 'music' is in small letters and it consists of better and worse pieces. I might as well have jigsaw puzzles as a hobby then!

To me that isn't what music is about... *it's about your blood flowing and do you know it and do you know where it's flowing and can you feel it,*

¹⁶¹ From ECM website: www.ecmrecords.com.

¹⁶² Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 101.

and if so, can you translate what that means. How can life come out of this piece of whatever it is that you're finding.

And I don't know many people who hear life when they listen. I often listen with people and it's very easy to know whether they hear that, or whether they're hearing only the notes.¹⁶³

With respect to reaching what Gernot Blume calls "the state of grace" in his music, Jarrett articulates what he sees as a clear difference between organic music-making and the common practice of self-consciously "using technique." In this respect, Jarrett's attempts to renounce his ego seem decidedly non-European, and stand in stark contrast to the obsession with virtuosic displays of technique found in both the classical and jazz worlds.

There is a fine line between using technique and making music. We must be open to the spaces (silence) in order to fill them just right. We must see the spaces, inhabit them, live them. Then the next note, the next move, becomes apparent because it is needed. Until it is apparent, nothing should be played. Until it is known, nothing should be anticipated. Until the whole appears, nothing should be criticized. Until you are participating in this, you cannot hear. Until you hear, you cannot play. Until you listen, you cannot make music. Music is a part of life. It is not a separate, controlled event where a musician presents something to a passive audience. It is in the blood. A musician should be able to reveal this. Music should not remind us of the control we seem to have over our lives. It should remind us of the necessity of surrender, the capacity in man for understanding the reason for this surrender, the conditions that are necessary for it, the Being necessary for it¹⁶⁴

Jarrett's statements about organic musical processes might be taken by some as a haughty artist being deliberately or self-consciously obscure. What seems a more accurate description of this, however, is that Jarrett's improvised music comes from a place that is genuinely mysterious, even to Jarrett himself, and his attempts to figure

¹⁶³ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 154.

out *where* it comes from – to describe this process in words – spoil the purity of his intent. In Jarrett’s own *words*, “And we’re left with nothing but words and words and words...”¹⁶⁵

Perhaps because he is so keyed in to the listening and reacting process, Jarrett is critical of other music that he feels doesn’t come about organically, which, perhaps not surprisingly, seems to be most music not made by Keith Jarrett.

I cannot say what I think is right about music; I only know the ‘rightness’ of it. I know it when I hear it. There is a release, a flowing out, a fullness to it that is not the same as richness or musicality. I can talk about it in this way because I do not feel that I ‘created’ this music as much as I allowed it to ‘emerge.’ It is this emergence that is inexplicable and incapable of being made solid, and I feel (or felt) as though not only do you never step in the same river twice, but you are never the same when stepping in the river. The river has always been there, despite our polluting it. This is a miracle, and in this day and age we need it. At least I do.¹⁶⁶

One major reason why Jarrett’s aesthetic clashes so harshly with classical models of music-making is that Jarrett’s outlook seems so inherently non-Western. He claims to have derived inspiration from “Eastern” music and thought, and mocks Western society for outlawing alternate means of experience.

We don’t have an ecstatic tradition – a tradition where the state of ecstasy is the main goal. ... We actually didn’t want that. We were the Puritans. We didn’t want the dark side, so we had to get rid of the other shit, so we ended up with the middle.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Liner notes for *Spirits*.

¹⁶⁵ Blume, 262.

¹⁶⁶ Liner notes for *Spirits*.

¹⁶⁷ Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 8.

In fact, the feeling that Jarrett is referencing when describing his experiences as an improviser is perhaps best described as “ecstasy,” and in fact he has used this term himself rather frequently.

If you’re improvising it’s a much clearer, closer representation of ecstasy than when you’re performing written music, because all the subject matter is coming through you. You’re not interpreting something. When the information is coming in and what you’re playing is good, there’s no way to describe it other than ecstasy.¹⁶⁸

I know that when you’re an improviser, a true improviser, you have to be familiar with ecstasy, otherwise you don’t connect with music. When you’re a composer, you can wait for these moments, you know, whenever. They might not be here today. But when you’re an improviser, at eight o’clock tonight, for example, you have to be so familiar with that state that you can almost bring it on.¹⁶⁹

Jarrett claims that his favorite descriptive word is “ferocious,” which apparently Jarrett had come across in a description of the work of a favorite Persian poet. (This poet is presumably the thirteenth-century Sufi and ecstatic poet Rumi; Jarrett often quotes Rumi in his liner notes). Jarrett applies the term to the delicate yet fierce trumpet sound of Miles Davis – also famously described by jazz reviewer Whitney Balliett as “like a man walking on eggshells.”¹⁷⁰

Someone could say, “Oh, anyone could play like Miles.” He has a trumpet sound that is almost like a student has when a student is learning trumpet. You get that same sound – almost – for a while and then you get more brassy and then you play more and more and you lose this “innocent” sound that Miles has. So the whole world can say, “anybody can get that sound,” *but nobody can get it*. And the reason Miles gets that sound and no one else gets it is because Miles wants that sound more than

¹⁶⁸ *Utne Reader Online*, as quoted from <http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jdale/text/notes/music.shtml>, accessed on 8 June 2004.

¹⁶⁹ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 131.

¹⁷⁰ Whitney Balliett. Andrew Clark, Editor. *Riffs & Choruses: A New Jazz Anthology* (Continuum Publishing, 1991).

they do, he wants that sound. He wants it with this *ferociousness*, so he gets it... Miles wants it with all his energy.

I'm trying to get out of this thing where "want" means something like "desire." I don't mean desire. *Ferocious* is too fast for desire. Desire is 'I'd love to do this.' The kind of want that would make me play the note I hear isn't ego. That's not ego, that's a sort of harmonizing with reality in a powerful way.¹⁷¹

Potential for ecstasy in classical music

Perhaps surprisingly, Jarrett has referred to a similar sort of transformative experience occurring during a performance of classical music. In 1999, ECM released Jarrett's recording of Mozart's Concerto No. 9 in E-flat, K. 271, with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra under Dennis Russell Davies. Jarrett describes a brief experience he had playing this music, claiming to his wife that "these three notes are worth the whole thing."

One of the most transcendent musical experiences I think I've ever had in music happened at the last Mozart recording... [in the Andantino of the E-flat concerto, K. 271] It's a C minor opening and the orchestra plays an introduction. Most of the motifs are in there as they usually are and then they stop and there's three pick up notes as they say and then I'm on one of the first bar and the orchestra's back in. And those are all octaves and with a grace note octave under it, G, C, E-flat, and then G at the top is the actual tutti. *I don't think I've ever had a bigger musical experience than playing those first three notes.*¹⁷²

In describing this moment, Jarrett couches his experience in the familiar language of "transcendence," no different from the way he discusses ecstatic moments of improvisation.

¹⁷¹ Keith Jarrett, "In search of folk roots," 113.

¹⁷² Keith Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing," 4.

I think I inhabited the world in which the music was conceived... in the breath between the stopping of the orchestra and the first note I played I was transformed from me playing the instrument *to where all this is really coming from*.¹⁷³

However, Jarrett seems skeptical about the ultimate potential of classical music performance to reach the “state of grace” that is possible in true improvisation. In a recent interview, Jarrett was asked the following question, “You have been described as a musical ecstatic. Can you achieve this state while playing classical music like you can in jazz?” Jarrett’s response:

Classical music is kind of barren in that respect. I don't think classical players are changed by the music they play. First of all, the music is already old, and even if it's new, it's old. Somebody has been poring over it, rewriting it, erasing it—by the time the music is rehearsed and played, *it represents a time that is gone*. As a jazz player, you're asked to do the opposite. You're asked to be emotionally fluid, like a liquid, and that's what we are anyway—we're 98 percent liquid. Because of that, a jazz player can get life-affirming or life-changing experiences that a classical player cannot. I have never seen a classical player who's happy. Usually they talk so fast that it's hard for me to believe that there's any part of them that's relaxed! I personally think that the stress of learning and interpreting that music is greater than the rewards.¹⁷⁴

Jarrett’s intellectual ponderings here, like so much of his writings, come off as deliciously subjective and patently unprovable. His assumptions that classical players en masse cannot undergo life-affirming experiences, based on the fact that the music they play is not theirs, are obviously rather large; no one will ever accuse Jarrett of shrinking from controversial statements. These comments do however articulate the core of Jarrett’s contrasting attitudes toward the performance of classical music and the process of improvising jazz.

¹⁷³ Keith Jarrett, “The ‘insanity’ of doing more than one (musical) thing,” 4.

¹⁷⁴ Keith Jarrett, *JazzTimes*, Jan/Feb 2004.

Chapter 13: Keith Jarrett's Music

Outline of career

Obviously, Keith Jarrett's aesthetic positions would not merit nearly the same consideration if his artistic activities did not support these beliefs. Jarrett's musical activities reflect a diversity and productivity perhaps unprecedented in American music, yet his music can be placed into a few loose categories.

The bulk of Jarrett's recording career might be summarized along the following lines:

- I. Collaborative jazz recordings (chronologically)
 - a) as sideman
 - 1. w/ Art Blakey (1966)
 - 2. w/ Charles Lloyd (1966-67)
 - 3. w/ Miles Davis (1970-72)
 - b) "American Quartet" (1971-76)
 - c) "European Quartet" (1974-79)
 - d) Keith Jarrett Trio (1983-present)
- II. Classical recordings
 - a) Baroque and Classical repertoire
 - 1. J.S. Bach
 - 2. Handel
 - 3. Mozart
 - b) 20th century repertoire
 - 1. Dmitri Shostakovich
 - 2. Arvo Pärt
 - 3. Lou Harrison
 - 4. Alan Hovhaness
 - 5. others (Peggy Glanville-Hicks, G.I. Gurdjieff, etc.)
- III. Solo recordings
 - a) improvised solo concerts (live audience)
 - b) improvised recitals (studio recordings)

Keith Jarrett Trio

Of any of his musical projects, the context of Jarrett's jazz piano trio perhaps provides the most convenient model for comparison with older historical models.

The format of the jazz piano trio, consisting of piano, bass, and drums, has existed at least since the mid-1940s, with Bud Powell's group perhaps standing as the first well-known example. Prior to the emergence of Jarrett's trio, the 1960s-era Bill Evans Trio was almost universally recognized to represent the pinnacle of this format, though some recent reviewers have acknowledged that the longevity and consistency of Jarrett's group earns it the title of "best piano trio in jazz history."

The Keith Jarrett Trio (also known as the "Standards Trio") – featuring Keith on piano, Gary Peacock on bass, and Jack DeJohnette on drums, made its recording debut on Peacock's 1977 album *Tales of Another*. However, the album *Standards Vol. 1*, recorded in January, 1983 and released under Jarrett's name, is generally thought to mark their official debut as a group. This unit has provided the center of Jarrett's musical output over the past twenty years. Within a relatively limited instrumental configuration, the members of Jarrett's trio have developed a rich language based on consistently deep listening and dynamic musical interaction.

Trio's dedication to standards

Also significant about this group is the steadfast dedication it has shown to the standards of the "great American songbook", namely the songs written roughly during the early-1930s to mid-1950s and initially intended for Broadway musicals. This corpus of music ("standards") has provided a wellspring for countless musicians

throughout jazz history. In this sense then, Jarrett is quite consciously placing his “Standards” Trio firmly in the lineage of traditional jazz. On the surface level, an interesting parallel might be made here to the neo-conservatism of Wynton Marsalis, whose music also displays a reliance on older musical song forms, yet it seems that the actual processes of these two figures could hardly be less similar. Jarrett’s music never reflects a conscious attempt to emulate or re-create, which by and large reflects Marsalis’s methodology. Jarrett’s reliance on jazz standards might also seem contradictory, and even neo-conservative, when placed in the light of his disposition for individuality, yet in his terms this is a rational act:

Standards are underestimated, because I don't think people understand how hard it is to write melody. Most of the composers I've recorded [on the Standards albums] are not considered 'serious' yet, they occupy a space that no one in serious composition could occupy.¹⁷⁵

Rather than limiting his protean creativity, Jarrett feels strongly that the standards setting allows for the proliferation of musical exploration and communication:

Maybe the trio ... needs to exist for one important reason that is not musical. *We are keeping this language alive.* We are not saying, “Well now, it’s modern day, we move to fusion or we have to change our language.” We are keeping this language no matter what the pressures are around us.

You don’t have to be coming on stage saying, “We’re playing our music.” There’s a possessiveness that goes along with that. A valuable player doesn’t have to play anything new to have value, because it’s not about the material, it’s about the playing.¹⁷⁶

In musical terms, the element that Jarrett values most about the trio setting is the freedom each player possesses.

With the trio, nothing is outlawed. There's no time that Jack has not to play, there's no time that Jack has to play. Gary, if he stops playing, I have the bass of the piano. There's a way of interacting that takes all responsibility away from any direction.

We're always looking to find the emotional center of a song, whatever that means and however mystical it might get. If we find the emotional center, then we can avoid getting emotional about it. That's something you cannot learn in youth. In youth, you have the tendency to indulge your emotions about the music rather than find the emotion already there.¹⁷⁷

What this trio does is deeper than what is shown in a single release... What we investigate is the music-making process.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Jarrett, "The 'insanity' of doing more than one (musical) thing."

¹⁷⁶ Keith Jarrett, "Sons of Miles."

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Downbeat, December 1995.

Solo Concerts

Taking nothing away from the importance of Jarrett's trio music, it is in the context of his "solo concerts" that we find the most dynamic musical representation of his aesthetic beliefs. These concerts are revolutionary in scope and spirit, and their open-ended, non-referential nature provides a vivid contrast to the more traditional scope of his piano trio setting. Jarrett comes to the piano with no preconceived notions, and allows the music to flow through him, without editing. In fact, Jarrett claims that having preconceived notions or ideas in his head prior to playing will spoil the purity of the event.

To do an improvised concert, I need to find a way to start the journey without creating the subject matter in my mind. In other words, I cannot have a melody or motif in my mind, because those things will protrude into the fabric. They will be too prominent and make the music seem like a solid object rather than a flowing process. I have to not play what's in my ears, if there's something in my ears. I have to find a way for my hands to start the concert without me.¹⁷⁹

Reminiscent of Indian raga performances, Jarrett improvises at the piano for up to three hours, though the majority of individual pieces run around thirty minutes in length. The formation of Jarrett's reputation in the 1970s was centered around the enormous, worldwide popularity of these concerts; approximately thirty solo concerts now exist in recorded form. Jarrett himself describes what goes on in his solo concerts:

One artist creating spontaneously something which is determined by the atmosphere, the audience, the place (both the room and the geographical location), the instrument; all these being channeled consciously through the artist so that everyone's efforts are equally rewarded, although the

¹⁷⁹ *Utne Reader Online*, as quoted from <http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jdale/text/notes/music.shtml>, accessed on 8 June 2004.

success or failure belongs completely to the artist himself. *The artist is responsible for every second.*

These comments may assist in explaining Jarrett's notoriously brusque concert demeanor; he is notorious for lecturing audiences, for stopping the music when people cough, and even walking out on audiences when he observes flash photography.

I've been considered – what's the word – a typically touchy artist. You know – fussy and grumpy. But people don't understand that I'm almost playing on the audience, instead of on the piano. I mean the audience is in the room and it's vibrating. Sometimes the most silent audience can be the most annoying, because you know they're being silent because they're not sure whether they should relax.¹⁸⁰

What is perhaps ironic is that, in the 1970s and early 80s, Jarrett's solo concerts seemed to provide initial inspiration for the "new age" genre of music, most of which consisted of meditative, pacifying piano noodling in major keys.¹⁸¹ Not surprisingly, Jarrett finds this music tepid and distasteful. He has in fact based his favorite description of his own music – "hard listening" – upon the "easy listening" phrase used to describe much "new age" music.¹⁸²

As recorded "events," Jarrett's solo concerts seem a particularly pertinent example marking tensions between the incongruous worlds of modern jazz and classical music. Unprecedented in scope and affect, these concerts allow for the improvisatory

¹⁸⁰ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 108.

¹⁸¹ Bizarrely enough, Jarrett's music was recently referred to in an episode of *The Sopranos*, when "relaxing music" was needed for use in a massage parlor. One can only imagine what Jarrett himself would think of this.

¹⁸² Keith Jarrett, "A Maverick Pianist Answers Back."

freedom of jazz or rock, while at the same time claiming the austerity of formal classical recitals. Jarrett has described the process of these concerts in terms of total improvisation, suggesting a Zen-like “emptying” of all self-consciousness and pre-conceptions prior to beginning the music, and continuing on with what might be most accurately described in terms of spiritual communion or prayer. In this context, Jarrett’s statements seem to articulate a Transcendentalist-influenced philosophy of “individually defined” spiritual practice.

Additionally, the solo concerts seem to hearken back to the nineteenth-century Romantic conception of virtuoso solo artist as demonically (or divinely) inspired madman, “possessed” by forces outside the realm of civilized, conscious control. Jarrett’s stage mannerisms fully support this comparison – his wild bodily contortions coupled with what might be described as ecstatic vocal “grunting” fall fully within the tradition of Lisztian self-indulgence.¹⁸³ Yet the solo concerts, though certainly eccentric, do not seem nearly as self-indulgent when seen in the light of Jarrett’s own self-critical commentary. Jarrett claims to be his own harshest critic, and in print he has given his artistic failures as much attention as his successes.

Every now and then I pulled something out, and usually I’d hear all the things I didn’t like. Mostly introductions. I agree with some of my critics on that: Just skip it. Not all of them, and not all of the longs ones either. In a concert hall, it’s a way of connecting to the room. It’s a way of saying hello, providing an entrance. But I hear myself get caught up in the process.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Village Voice music critic Chip Stern once referred to Jarrett as “the Elvis Presley of high art.”

¹⁸⁴ Jarrett, “Order and Ordeal,” 41.

I would argue that as “the music” of the solo concerts is in effect entirely dependent on Jarrett himself, the taking on of this responsibility, completely without preparation, stands as one of the most genuine displays of artistic vulnerability imaginable.

Rolling Stone critic Bob Palmer, discussing a solo concert given by Jarrett in New York:

It demonstrated his strengths – his sure time, his far-ranging imagination, his sharply honed technique and his particular inner fire, which is at once steady and vulnerable. When he plays alone, Jarrett pushes his creativity to the limits. It’s almost scary to hear someone who apparently relies so totally on the spirited, flowing, almost effusive directions of the muse, yet the muse never seems to let him down.¹⁸⁵

Other performance situations

Though he is now notoriously reluctant to make music with anyone outside of his own hand-selected circle of musician friends, over time Jarrett has recorded with many other important jazz musicians. In the 1970s, Jarrett kept two quartets afloat concurrently: the “American Quartet” featured the Americans Dewey Redman on saxophones, Charlie Haden on bass, and Paul Motian on drums; and the “European Quartet” featured the Norwegian Jan Garbarek on saxophone, and the Swedes Pelle Danielsson on bass, and Jon Christensen on drums. The composition *Personal Mountains* from the album of the same name, recorded live in 1979, stands as a fine example of the “ferociousness” that Jarrett references. Musically, this piece exploits a relentlessly driving rhythmic pulse and forward-propelling modal melody. *Personal Mountains* is through-composed, and is structured in an uneven seventeen-bar phrase, which serves to heighten the feeling of ecstatic disorientation. Also, the

¹⁸⁵ Carr, 62.

very title of this piece suggests individualism and perhaps even Transcendentalist philosophy.

When discussing Jarrett's most important music, it is crucial to mention the two-disc set *Spirits*, released in 1986. Perhaps the oddest, most incongruous item in Jarrett's discography, *Spirits* features Jarrett improvising on "ethnic" instruments. This record was completely improvised by Jarrett in a month-long whirlwind of ecstatic "inspiration" in his home recording studio. The fact that this album features almost no piano, yet Jarrett himself claims that it is his most important recording, supports Jarrett's contention that the piano is inadequate for much of the music that he "hears." This album stands about as far away from classical performing as is imaginable. *Spirits* consists of multi-tracked improvisations recorded on Pakistani flute, tablas, South American shakers, African cowbell, Vermont "folk" alto flute, soprano saxophone, piano, guitar, miniature glockenspiel, tambourine, and six different types of recorders. On the surface, this album sounds most similar to what is generally referred to as "world" or "ethnic" music, and has been rather summarily dismissed by most critics¹⁸⁶ – yet in Jarrett's words, *Spirits* is his most important, urgent, and necessary musical creation.

I'm sort of weaving a rug in my work. It's a very colorful; rug, but the pattern in the center is *Spirits*. That pattern was not able to be in the center until various things were accomplished first. So when people say it's a naïve effort, it's anything but that.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ *Time* reviewer Michael Walsh refers to *Spirits* as "a self-indulgent multicultural exercise in Pakistani flute puffing, Indian table thumping, and soprano-sax wailing." (Walsh, "Growing Into the Silence.")

In a way, [Spirits is] an answer and a rebuttal to where things are now, let's say, a level of incompetence that allows the music to come through, rather than a level of competence that doesn't allow anything but the notes to come through.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 164.

¹⁸⁸ Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 162-3.

Chapter 14: Summary

Clearly, Keith Jarrett has much to say about music, about society, about life. In both his wide-ranging musical explorations and his philosophical perspectives, Jarrett “questions the questions,” inspiring, enlightening, frustrating, and certainly provoking. In his insistence that music and life be part of an inseparable and larger spiritual unity, Jarrett resembles Charles Ives, and time may tell whether Jarrett’s historical legacy ends up resembling that of the eccentric Yankee. Jarrett’s aesthetic clearly shares commonalities with the tradition of American musical and philosophical individualism, and Jarrett’s ideas are perhaps best seen as a modern manifestation and continuation of these traits. Keith Jarrett asks an important question in the title of his New York Times article: *Categories Aplenty, but Where’s the Music?* In this context, as well as in his art, Jarrett provides the answer to his own question: “The music is in the making of the music. The heart is where the music is.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Liner notes to *La Scala* (ECM 1640, 1995).

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